

HEARING TO REVIEW THE ADMINISTRATION AND DELIVERY OF CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, CREDIT, ENERGY, AND RESEARCH OF THE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS

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HEARING TO REVIEW THE ADMINISTRATION AND DELIVERY OF CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

THURSDAY, JULY 1, 2010

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, CREDIT, ENERGY, AND
RESEARCH,
COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE,
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:00 a.m., in Room 1300, Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Tim Holden [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Members present: Representatives Holden, Herseth Sandlin, Dahlkemper, Schauer, Kissell, Costa, Bright, Murphy, Owens, Minnick, Peterson (*ex officio*), Goodlatte, Moran, Neugebauer, and Luetkemeyer.

Staff present: Cindy Birdsong, Nona Darrell, Liz Friedlander, John Konya, James Ryder, Anne Simmons, April Slayton, Rebekah Solem, Patricia Barr, Brent Blevins, Tamara Hinton, Josh Maxwell, Jamie Mitchell, and Sangina Wright.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. TIM HOLDEN, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM PENNSYLVANIA

The CHAIRMAN. This hearing of the Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research to review the administration and delivery of conservation programs will come to order.

I would like to thank our witnesses and guests for coming today. This hearing presents an opportunity for Members of the Subcommittee to review how USDA administers conservation programs and the delivery system that is in place for providing technical assistance to producers.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Farm Service Agency, through the authority of this Committee and the farm bill, currently administer over 20 programs to assist producers and landowners who wish to practice conservation on agricultural lands. Early conservation efforts were focused on reducing high levels of soil erosion, addressing water quality and quantity issues, but have since evolved and expanded to address other natural resources concerns, such as wildlife, habitat, air quality, wetlands restoration and protection, energy efficiency, and sustainable agriculture.

Throughout this period of growth, one thing has become clear: Technical assistance is a crucial component of conservation, and it

is important that landowners have access to the technical expertise they need in order to implement conservation practices.

In the 2002 Farm Bill, we recognized and responded to the growing demand and need for more technical assistance. We included a provision that allowed producers to retain approved and certified third-party providers, known as TSPs, for technical assistance. That provision maintains and expands technical capacity for agriculture conservation programs.

However, despite those changes, and others included in the 2008 Farm Bill, we still find ourselves in a situation where there is not enough technical assistance available to landowners, and it is critical that we get this right.

Over the years, USDA has transferred responsibility for administration, leadership, and funding of conservation programs between FSA and NRCS. Last year, NRCS initiated a streamlining initiative to identify the most efficient and effective model for delivering conservation assistance, but there is still debate about what the proper role for each agency should be in order to ensure that landowners have access to the technical expertise they need.

Effective administration of conservation programs is an important topic that should be further discussed. Equally as important are the delivery mechanisms in place to make certain that technical assistance is available to those landowners who want it.

Whether through NRCS or a technical service provider, a consistent message we are hearing across the country is that more people are needed in the field to provide technical services to make certain that landowners have access to the technical assistance they need to make land management decisions and implement conservation practices.

Farmers and ranchers have always been the original stewards of the land and continue to be the best advocates for resource conservation. I look forward to today's expert testimony and the opportunity to listen, learn, and question those responsible for ensuring that that remains true in the future.

I will recognize the Ranking Member, the gentleman from Virginia.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. BOB GOODLATTE, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM VIRGINIA**

Mr. GOODLATTE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding today's hearing to review the delivery and administration of conservation programs.

Since 1985, farm bills have increased the size and complexity of conservation programs. There are a number of programs that can assist producers to become better stewards of the land. The 2008 Farm Bill created new conservation programs that allow cooperation and flexibility among producers and organizations to target conservation initiatives such as the Chesapeake Bay, which is of great importance to the farmers and ranchers in Virginia and Pennsylvania.

The farm bill increased funding to oversubscribed programs to address backlogs and retool existing programs to make them more producer friendly and available on a national basis. However, if the programs are not being administered effectively, and our producers

are not receiving the technical guidance they need, then an increase in the number of programs and in the level of funding will not result in improved conservation benefits.

Providing the participants of these programs with the necessary financial and technical assistance is essential to the success of conservation practices. This Committee has worked hard to make sure that each conservation program has adequate dollars. We have authorized the use of third-party technical service providers to assist NRCS and the FSA staff, and we have encouraged streamlining the application process. The delivery system is the lifeline to ensuring the success of conservation programs.

The administration of these programs and the salaries and expenses involved in administering them have been a concern to the House Committee on Agriculture for some time. Congress needs to understand fully where the deficiencies are in USDA administering these programs and systems, and whether or not they need fine-tuning so that farmers and ranchers get cost-efficient conservation on the ground.

I would like to thank Chief White, from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Mr. Jonathan Coppess, the Administrator for the Farm Service Agency, for being here today to testify. I also want to thank our witnesses on the second panel for their participation in this hearing, and for the work that they are doing to help deliver conservation programs.

I am especially pleased to welcome Mr. Bill Braford, a consulting forester from Rock Ridge County, Virginia. Mr. Braford is a constituent who has more than 35 years of experience in the field of forestry. After spending 30 years working for the Virginia Department of Forestry, he became a consulting forester in 2008. He acts as a technical service provider for NRCS, and currently serves on the board of the Virginia Forestry Association. I look forward to hearing his insights into USDA conservation programs and what we should improve in the next farm bill.

Mr. Chairman, again, thank you for holding this hearing. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair thanks the gentleman and would ask all other Members to submit any opening statement for the record. [The prepared statement of Mr. Peterson follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. COLLIN C. PETERSON, A REPRESENTATIVE IN
CONGRESS FROM MINNESOTA

Good morning, and thank you, Mr. Holden, and Mr. Goodlatte for holding today's hearing of the Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research.

Today's hearing focuses on the administration and delivery of conservation programs through technical service providers and technical assistance. I am concerned that with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) duplicating efforts in record-keeping and check-writing, the current delivery system is not working in the best way possible for producers or the taxpayers.

This is why today's hearing is so important. I believe it's not a matter of more money but rather facilitating a dialogue between NRCS, FSA and their partners that will solve this problem. Getting more boots on the ground to provide adequate technical assistance to producers is necessary to ensure participation in conservation programs.

The Committee has already started holding hearings on the 2012 Farm Bill and as the process moves forward we will look into whether or not there is a better way to divide the responsibilities between NRCS and FSA when providing technical as-

sistance to producers wishing to participate in conservation programs. This is something I wanted to address in the last farm bill but unfortunately, we couldn't see that happen. Today's hearing is a good place to start to look for solutions and ways to address these issues in the next farm bill.

I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses and again thank the Chairman for holding today's hearing.

The CHAIRMAN. I would like to welcome our first panel, Mr. Dave White, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service at the Department of Agriculture; and Mr. Jonathan Coppess, Administrator for the Farm Service Agency with the Department of Agriculture.

Mr. White, you may begin when you are ready.

**STATEMENT OF DAVE WHITE, CHIEF, NATURAL RESOURCES
CONSERVATION SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Mr. WHITE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Goodlatte, Members of the Subcommittee. It is an honor to be here.

First, I would like to thank all of you for the joint resolution you passed honoring the 75th anniversary of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. We deeply appreciate that very much.

I often hear people talk about what the greatest conservation program ever is. And the response varies, and it is generally from where the person sits the response they make. But, in my mind, the greatest conservation program ever occurred in 1935 when this Congress unanimously passed and provided for a continuing soil and water conservation program, voluntary, incentive-based, providing technical assistance to our nation's farmers and ranchers.

Working with our partners and through conservation districts, we have technical experts that work with farmers and ranchers openly in an honest relationship. The farm gate is open for us, and there is trust on both sides. No other Federal agency has the access or the trust that we enjoy, and I will jealously safeguard that and do whatever I can to improve the efficiency of how it functions.

And research is showing that we have positive results. Cropland erosion since 1982—between 1982 and 1987 was reduced by 43 percent. That is a stunning amount in anyone's book. Last month, we also reported the results from the Conservation Effects Assessment Project in the Upper Mississippi. It is showing us that conservation works. We have seen huge reductions in many of the natural resources issues we have to deal with.

It is also showing that us that suites of conservation practices work better than ones in isolation; and it is showing us that if we target our efforts, we can have an even greater effect. For example, if we work on just 15 percent of the cropland in the upper Mississippi, we can reduce overland nitrogen loss by 29 percent and overland phosphorous loss by 20 percent.

We have also improved our efficiency. Between 2005 and 2009, we have doubled the number of customers we service every year; and we are also helping farmers and ranchers meet those emerging challenges that Mr. Holden talked about—energy, air, environmental service markets.

And as we have learned from the CEAP that I just mentioned to ensure conservation gets on the ground, we are now targeting a little bit of the funds through special initiatives. We have landscape-level initiatives such as the Mississippi River, the Chesapeake Bay, and the Colorado River.

peake Bay, Sage-Grouse. We have resource-focused initiatives such as the organic water quality, water conservation, air quality. And while most of the activity in this is statutorily derived, we are focusing about eight percent of EQIP funds on the initiatives, mostly the Sage-Grouse and Mississippi River.

We are also working to get our house in order, Mr. Goodlatte. The amount of financial assistance we administer has increased 376 percent since 2002; and even though our productivity has doubled, our front line staff has remained pretty much constant. We have to figure out ways to do that, and I think we have tremendous opportunities to do so.

The primary one is what Mr. Holden mentioned, the streamlining initiative. We want to simplify the delivery, streamline our processes, and make sure that we retain our science-based delivery system.

There are five components to this. It ranges from integrating all our tools into one desktop icon, to eliminating the duplicate entry of data, to establishing a client gateway on the Web where a farmer or rancher can sit at home and apply for a program. If they have a contract, they can look at their contract and see if there is a practice due or where they are at. They can see if they are due a payment, where it is in the process. They can look at their conservation plan.

These kinds of things are going to have a huge impact, and our projections are that it is going to reduce the administrative clerical burden on our field people by 80 percent. Our goal is to free up 75 percent of our folks' time to be in the field.

You have a huge panel behind me on technical service providers. They are going to give you a lot of information.

We surveyed our technical service providers. We only have 1,200 of them. We really should have a lot more. But we are looking at training and how do we eliminate inconsistencies between Federal and state. What can we do to make the certification process simpler? What can we do to address the payment rates?

And we are also developing what we call a conservation plug-in, where a TSP can go through the USDA security firewall and get client data that he is authorized to get, pull it out, work on it, finish it, and put it back into the system.

In summary, we are working to streamline and modernize the delivery of services to meet the needs of today's customers, and the need remains great. I think you all know that the U.N. is projecting 2.3 billion more people and is saying that a 70 percent increase of food production is going to be needed in the next 4 decades. That is a huge undertaking and how we meet that challenge is going to define us, but I am confident that we will. I think that our children will inherit a resource base as rich as the one we have now.

Thank you for inviting me to be here. I welcome the opportunity to address any questions you have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. White follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DAVE WHITE, CHIEF, NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to share our experiences in implementing a number of conservation programs contained in Title II of the Food Security Act of 1985 that were added or re-authorized by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Farm Bill). I am happy to be here again to discuss the work of the Natural Resources Conservation Service in delivering Conservation Technical Assistance and providing technical and financial assistance through 2008 Farm Bill programs.

75 Years of Helping People Help the Land

Two thousand-ten is the 75th anniversary of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Since our founding in 1935, we have helped America's farmers, ranchers, and forest owners manage the nation's working lands to ensure continued agricultural productivity and a healthy environment. With about 70 percent of U.S. land in the lower 48 states in private hands; our mission remains a critical one.

The Upper Mississippi River Basin Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) Report released last month shows our efforts over the past $\frac{3}{4}$ of a century have not been in vain. The CEAP data confirm that voluntary, incentive-based conservation works and that the conservation practices applied by farmers in the basin have resulted in a 69 percent reduction in sediment loss.

Findings also indicate that implementing suites of practices to address multiple resource concerns is more effective than using single practices, reinforcing the need to engage in comprehensive conservation planning. For many producers, conservation planning is the fundamental starting point for maintaining and improving the natural resources that support productive and profitable agricultural operations. In addition, the CEAP Report provides quantitative support for improving program effectiveness by targeting conservation programs to the acres with the most critical need.

A conservation plan tailored specifically to a farm or ranch identifies immediate or potential resource problems that could affect production; helps producers comply with environmental regulations; helps farmers and ranchers qualify for various United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs; adapts to changing operational goals; establishes a reasonable schedule to apply needed conservation practices; and can save farmers and ranchers time, labor and energy. Once we have worked with farmers and ranchers to evaluate their needs and conservation options, farm bill programs are available to assist them in implementing the components of their conservation plans.

Comprehensive planning through both technical and financial assistance to land owners and managers has been at the heart of NRCS's work throughout our history and will remain there for the foreseeable future. Yet, as we begin our next 75 years of service, we realize that *how* we deliver this assistance matters more than ever.

From FY 2005 through FY 2009, NRCS has written conservation plans on over 185 million acres of crop, grazing, and forest land. In addition, NRCS developed over 1,200 area-wide plans in FY 2009 for a total of nearly 4,000 since FY 2006. These area-wide plans look at opportunities for improvement beyond farm or ranch boundary, involving multiple farm or ranch operations and local communities. NRCS staff is servicing more customers per person, doubling the number of farmer or rancher assisted per full time equivalent (FTE) from FY 2005 to FY 2009.

In accordance with NRCS regulations that implement the National Environmental Policy Act at 7 CFR Part 650.5, NRCS will be preparing site specific environmental evaluations to determine the need for any Environmental Assessment of Environmental Impact Statement. Environmental evaluations (EE) integrate environmental concerns throughout the planning, installation, and operation of NRCS-assisted projects. The EE applies to all assistance provided by NRCS, but planning intensity, public involvement, and documentation of actions vary according to the scope of the action. NRCS begins consideration of environmental concerns when information gathered during the environmental evaluation is used:

- To identify environmental concerns that may be affected, gather baseline data, and predict effects of alternative courses of actions.
- To provide data to applicants for use in establishing objectives commensurate with the scope and complexity of the proposed action.
- To assist in the development of alternative courses of action; (40 CFR 1502.14). In NRCS-assisted project actions, nonstructural, water conservation, and other

alternatives that are in keeping with the Water Resources Council's Principles and Standards are considered, if appropriate.

- To perform other related investigations and analyses as needed, including economic evaluation, engineering investigations, *etc.*
- To assist in the development of detailed plans for implementation and operation and maintenance.

Factors, such as greater taxpayer investment in conservation through farm bills, the desire for increased transparency and financial accountability, advances in science and technology, the need to sustainably feed a growing global population, and burgeoning public interest in environmental health, compel us to upgrade and update our plans, programs, policies, and procedures. Moreover, in the current farm bill, Congress has called on us to help producers meet new conservation challenges, such as air quality, energy conservation, mitigating for the impacts of climate change, and participation in expanding markets for ecosystem services.

To address all of these priorities, I articulated three goals upon becoming Chief last year. They are: ensuring conservation gets on the ground, improve agency internal controls and increase accountability, and creating a climate where private lands conservation can succeed.

Ensuring Conservation Gets on the Ground

We have taken several steps to ensure conservation gets on the ground. First, we are targeting some of our financial and technical assistance to landscape-scale conservation, specific resource concerns, and special initiatives. By working at this scale we can treat resource concerns much more effectively and achieve measurable results. Landscape-scale initiatives include work in the Mississippi River Basin, the Great Lakes and the Chesapeake Bay and efforts to restore sage-grouse habitat; targeted resource concerns including air quality and the initiative for organic producers.

Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI). NRCS is working to maximize environmental benefits in the Mississippi River Basin through the MRBI. The initiative's main goal is to address nutrient loading in the basin. In addition to these nutrient-focused efforts, NRCS will also partner to find new and innovative ways to address resource concerns ranging from water quality to soil erosion to energy conservation and wildlife habitat. NRCS recently announced funding for 76 projects in 12 states: Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. Funding is provided through the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, the Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) and Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG).

Sage-Grouse Initiative (SGI). The SGI is designed to enhance public awareness of sage-grouse concerns, increase cooperation and collaboration from a broad-based partnership, and provide funding for conservation practices that benefit sage-grouse habitat. In March, NRCS announced that up to \$16 million in financial assistance would be made available to protect sage-grouse population and habitat in 11 western states: California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Funding is provided through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). An additional \$5 million has been provided through EQIP and WHIP to meet growing demand under this initiative for a total of \$21 million.

Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). The GLRI supports the Administration's vision for promoting voluntary action to protect and restore priority watersheds. NRCS received \$34 million for the Initiative through an Interagency Agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The funding will be used by NRCS to implement priority programs, projects, and activities to protect, restore, and maintain the Great Lakes ecosystem, as identified in the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan. The funding will be released through a number of NRCS programs, including Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA), EQIP, WHIP, Emergency Watershed Protection Program-Floodplain Easements, and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. States receiving funding include: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative. The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative was authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill to provide assistance to agricultural producers to minimize excess nutrients and sediments in order to restore, preserve, and protect the Chesapeake Bay. Bay states include Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative is currently being delivered through the EQIP and WHIP. On June 18, USDA unveiled three showcase watersheds designed to demonstrate what can be achieved by combining strong partnerships, sound science and funding to solve natural resource

problems in a targeted area in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. The showcase watersheds are designed to demonstrate water quality improvements in a confined geographic area through expanded producer outreach efforts, use of innovative conservation practices and intensive conservation planning, implementation and monitoring. The goal is to reach out to 100 percent of the agricultural producers in each watershed to gauge their current level of conservation treatment and explain additional technical and financial assistance opportunities available through various conservation programs.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Air Quality Initiative. The 2008 Farm Bill includes a provision for EQIP to provide payments to implement practices to address priority air quality resource concerns from agricultural operations and to meet Federal, state, and local regulatory requirements. In Fiscal Year 2010, \$33,825,000 of EQIP financial assistance has been allocated to Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas for this initiative.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program Organic Initiative. The EQIP Organic Initiative requires payments to be made for conservation practices on operations related to organic production and/or transition to organic production. In FY 2010, \$50 million in financial assistance was allocated among all states.

A second key aspect of getting conservation on the ground is retooling programs for better performance and to increase the efficiency of technical assistance resources. NRCS has dedicated significant staff resources from the states and field to improve performance of programs such as the Wetlands Reserve Program, EQIP and CIG.

The President's FY 2011 budget also includes a new proposal for Strategic Watershed Action Teams (SWATs) to be deployed in high priority agricultural watersheds. Though the Conservation Technical Assistance Program, NRCS will use teams of Soil Conservationists, specialists (engineers, biologist, range specialist or others as needed) depending on the need in each watershed. The goal of deploying the SWATs will be to reach every landowner in a targeted watershed eligible for NRCS programs and provide them with the technical assistance to assess their natural resource conditions and offer resource planning and program help. Through the use of SWATs, NRCS will greatly improve the environmental cost effectiveness of technical and financial assistance programs.

Further, we are applying the knowledge gained through CEAP and other research initiatives to improve program performance. For example, NRCS has just completed the first ranking period sign up under the new Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and are pleased to announce that 12, 649,918 acres were enrolled as of June 18, 2010. We reviewed public comments, assessed the first ranking period and made changes that encourage enhanced stewardship and performance. We now have a final rule for CSP which includes suites of conservation enhancements, as CEAP suggested, to improve environmental performance. CSP remains available nationwide, as provided in the 2008 Farm Bill, and the second ranking period—now underway—is being conducted under the new rule.

Improve Agency Internal Controls and Increase Accountability

The second goal is to improve agency internal controls and increase accountability. Since FY 2002, the amount of financial assistance NRCS administers has grown by 376 percent. To support this growth, staff year funding has increased as well. Funding for technical assistance (salaries and expenses) related to the farm bill programs has increased significantly, from \$46 million in FY 2002 to \$577 million in FY 2010. In addition, the number of staff years associated with farm bill programs has also increased from 431 in FY 2002 to 5,705 in FY 2010.

However, since FY 2005, the number of FTEs providing technical assistance through the Conservation Technical Assistance Program has decreased 13 percent. Across all programs, the applied conservation practice acres per FTE increased by 32 percent. This trend requires us to undertake new streamlining, partnership and management initiatives to increase our efficiency, effectiveness and conservation results.

Delivering science-based technical assistance to clients is the foundation for successfully carrying out NRCS's mission of helping people help the land. Our on-site assistance to help clients identify conservation objectives, inventory resource concerns and opportunities, analyze alternatives, and formulate treatments through conservation planning is unique. Provision of this technical assistance is documented in 1.6 million conservation plans and 30 million planned practices in our National Conservation Plan Database.

Conservation planning is a sound approach for the consistent and effective delivery of financial assistance programs, helping to ensure that the public's investment

in private lands conservation achieves desired environmental outcomes. The farm bill expanded NRCS's field operations to include new authorities and the development and administration of contracts and easements for financial assistance programs. NRCS now manages about 400,000 farm bill program contracts in its national ProTracts database. But our current business model and processes leave inadequate time for on-site planning, design, installation assistance and critical follow-up activities. In addition, NRCS's information technology tools need to be integrated to gain efficiencies.

In January 2009, NRCS responded by formally initiating the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative, to define and implement a more effective, efficient, and sustainable business model for delivering conservation assistance. Three overarching objectives were identified:

1. *Simplify Conservation Delivery*—The new business model must make the delivery of conservation programs easier for both customers and employees.
2. *Streamline Business Processes*—The new business model and processes must increase efficiency through streamlined processes, and be integrated across Agency business lines.
3. *Ensure Science-based Assistance*—The new business model must reinforce the continued delivery of technically-sound products and services.

As NRCS implements key parts of the Streamlining Initiative, we anticipate a future where technical field staffs will spend as much as 75 percent of their conservation assistance time in the field, working one-on-one with customers, to deliver planning, application, and financial assistance in a way that emphasizes resource concerns—rather than programs.

Pillars of the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative consist of:

1. **Define, streamline, and integrate conservation assistance processes across business lines.** To ensure field staff can focus their time on the Agency's core activities, NRCS will more clearly define, streamline, and institutionalize sound conservation assistance business processes.
2. **Prioritize and deploy information technology that effectively supports and aligns with the delivery of conservation assistance.** NRCS will develop a single portal, called a Conservation Desktop, which will allow field staff and partners to access all the tools and data needed to deliver technical and financial assistance through one application. This integrated environment will eliminate duplicate data entry by staff and increase the efficiency of our information technology development and use. NRCS will fully integrate geospatial data and services into its business processes and tools to reduce administrative time and enhance the quality of conservation plans. Mobile computing technologies will be institutionalized for planners nationwide, making our work more efficient, reducing the travel time from unnecessary trips, and improving customer service.
3. **Provide field technical staff with natural resource science and technology tools focused on conservation planning and practice implementation.** The foundation data and processes for assessing resource concerns during planning is being redesigned to simplify planning and client decision-making, and ensure NRCS plans document estimated conservation benefits. This includes restructuring the various science and technology tools used by field staff nationwide to make them simpler, more consistent, quicker to use, and accessible in both the office and the field. The first of these tools to be updated will support grazing, erosion calculations, and wildlife habitat assessments. NRCS will also be integrating area-wide assessment approaches into the Agency's conservation delivery processes, and integrating conservation effects into NRCS' planning tools to improve client decision-making, better describe outcomes, streamline program ranking, and more efficiently support environmental market programs.
4. **To implement programs through staffing and delivery approaches designed around more efficient business processes.** Alternative staffing strategies to address financial assistance needs and supporting information systems will be implemented. Emerging technologies, such as electronic signatures and alternative approaches for screening, ranking and funding program applications will be tested and implemented to streamline program delivery and simplify program participation for clients.
5. **Establish tools and processes for interacting with clients that are resource-centric, enhance customer service, and increase NRCS' efficiency.** A variety of new approaches for interacting with clients will be imple-

mented to enhance and customize the Agency's services to its growingly-diverse clientele. The first will be a web-based Client Gateway that will allow USDA program participants to apply for assistance; view plans and contracts, check on the status of payments from NRCS; digitally sign documents; review upcoming work; and more at their convenience.

Other management initiatives we have set in motion include:

Strengthened Financial Management. NRCS continues to make internal changes based on the lessons learned through financial audits. We are working to develop and implement a Managerial Cost Accounting (MCA) model to measure and properly allocate costs that align with the strategic goals. MCA will be integrated into all aspects of NRCS operations to support financial reporting, workload and staffing management, budgeting and operational decision-making, and statutory fund allocation requirements.

NRCS is committed to updating financial policies and procedures to provide its workforce with the necessary information to produce accurate, reliable, and timely financial information. All financial policies currently published in the General Manual will be reviewed and updated by the end of the fiscal year.

Funding Allocation Reform. NRCS currently uses a complex automated process for allocating its financial and technical resources to the states. Efforts are in place to review and reform the Agency's allocation process to better align the dollars with resource conservation needs and concerns. By coordinating the development of conservation plans with participation in financial assistance programs, the Agency will be better positioned to identify future workload and the dollars needed to implement the conservation plans through mandatory financial assistance programs, such as EQIP. The information from conservation plans, along with refining our Activity-Based Costing data, workforce planning and workload analysis, will be the framework for a new allocation process.

National Headquarters Realignment. NRCS National Headquarters was realigned in January 2010 to provide the infrastructure to achieve Agency priorities. The objectives of the realignment were to provide more timely and effective support to NRCS state and field offices; better maintenance and communication of policy and guidance; better aligned administrative functions and management services, and increased collaboration at all levels of the Agency to allow more time for state and field employees to work on conservation activities in the field.

Creating a Climate Where Private Lands Conservation Can Succeed

The third goal is creating a climate where private lands conservation can succeed. An essential element of creating a climate for success is working effectively with diverse partners at all levels to implement farm bill conservation programs. This includes working successfully with our USDA sister agencies including the Forest Service, Rural Development, and the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Two programs we deliver jointly with FSA are of particular interest to this Subcommittee—the Conservation Reserve Program, including the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, and the Grassland Reserve Program.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP provides technical and financial assistance to eligible farmers and ranchers to address soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on their lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. CRP is administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA), with NRCS providing land eligibility determinations, conservation planning, and practice implementation.

NRCS and FSA have entered into a Memorandum of Agreement which outlines the responsibilities of NRCS and FSA with respect to CRP technical assistance (TA). Under this Agreement, FSA processes payments for landowners and NRCS is reimbursed for TA expenses.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). The purpose of GRP is to assist landowners in conserving grazing uses and related conservation values by restoring and conserving eligible land through easements and rental contracts. The GRP statute authorizes the enrollment of an additional 1.22 million acres of eligible land from FY 2009 through FY 2012. GRP is administered jointly by NRCS and FSA. NRCS administers the easement portion of GRP and provides technical assistance to landowners for both easements and long-term agreements and all conservation planning.

NRCS and FSA have entered into a Memorandum of Understanding which outlines the responsibilities of NRCS and FSA with respect to the implementation of GRP. FSA processes GRP payments and NRCS reimburses FSA the actual personnel costs, overtime and travel related to assisting with GRP administration. FSA determines payment limitations for rental contracts and any applicable restoration agreements, assesses penalties and associated costs, makes payments, and main-

tains funding codes for easements and rental contracts to monitor the 60/40 funding split required by the 2008 Farm Bill.

A second vital set of partners is our Technical Service Providers (TSPs). The 2002 Farm Bill first authorized the use of TSPs by requiring USDA to allow producers to receive technical assistance from individuals other than NRCS staff. In other words, TSPs are force multipliers in putting conservation on the ground. Over the 6 years of the TSP Initiative, 56 percent of its funds have been obligated through EQIP. The major remaining distribution of funds is: CRP, 13 percent; CTA, 12 percent; Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), 11 percent; WHIP, four percent; Watershed Rehabilitation, two percent; and Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP), two percent. In FY 2009, NRCS partnered with the private sector, state agencies, soil and water conservation districts and nongovernmental organizations to provide \$29 million in technical assistance through the TSP program.

The 2008 Farm Bill amended the TSP provisions, requiring national standards for TSP certification. TSPs register, become certified and manage their TSP profiles through TechReg, an on-line support tool. TechReg also helps landowners locate and choose a certified registered TSP who can help them meet their conservation goals. NRCS can also obtain technical or support services directly through procurement contracts, contribution agreements, and cooperative agreements.

Assessing our National Resources

Results of our latest National Resources Inventory (NRI), released this past April, underscore the wisdom of Congress in establishing an ongoing program of soil and water conservation on private lands 75 years ago. The NRI shows that Congress' decision continues to pay dividends, as total cropland erosion declined about 43% between 1982 and 2007. This achievement is testimony to the commitment of generations of landowners and operators to conserving our natural resource base.

While that is worth celebrating, a second finding from the same report tells us the nation's working lands are now at risk from development. During the same 25 year period, the total acreage of developed land in the country increased by about 56%. This means that more than 1/3 of all land that has ever been developed in the lower 48 states during our nation's history was developed during the last quarter century.

Of particular concern is that nearly 14 million acres of prime farmland were developed between 1982 and 2007. That represents the loss of nearly 4% of all prime farmland in the U.S.—or an area almost as large as West Virginia. Cropland acreage declined nearly 15%, but there's better news here. About half of this reduction is accounted for in enrollments of environmentally sensitive cropland in CRP, which NRCS helps to implement.

We believe these results prove the work of NRCS is as important in 2010 as it ever was—and likely growing in importance, as the amount of available farmland decreases and the demand for food increases. The United Nations predicts world food output must grow by 70% over the next 4 decades to feed an additional 2.3 billion people worldwide by 2050. That will place additional pressures on our soil, air, and water resources.

We must use knowledge gained from the NRI, CEAP, and other essential tools to prioritize our efforts where the conservation need is most critical and where the investments will do the most good.

We must also be serious about keeping working lands working and must help agricultural producers stay on their land. We must maintain and build new alliances with partners to enable land owners to take full advantage of our easement programs, which reserve farmlands, ranchlands, grasslands and wetlands for current agricultural uses—as well as for future generations.

Another avenue of support for producers is generating new revenue streams for them through environmental services markets. As Congress has directed, we must help farmers and ranchers gain recognition for all the environmental benefits working landowners provide to their fellow citizens, and pay them for them—benefits like clean air, clean and abundant supplies of water, carbon storage in fields and forests, and wildlife habitat that creates opportunities for hunting and fishing.

In Closing

As NRCS works to streamline and modernize the delivery of services to meet the demands of today's customers, we are also helping to achieve the enduring objectives of a nation committed to both productive lands and a healthy environment. During FY 2009 over 48 million acres of agricultural land had at least one conservation practice applied. Interest and demand for conservation assistance remains strong. Support for comprehensive planning, CTA and financial assistance provided through farm bills remains essential to our success, in 2010 and beyond.

Thank you for inviting me to be here. I am now happy to take any questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. White.
Mr. Coppess.

**STATEMENT OF JONATHAN W. COPPESS, ADMINISTRATOR,
FARM SERVICE AGENCY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Mr. COPPESS. Thank you, Chairman Holden, Ranking Member Goodlatte, and Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss implementation of conservation programs and the technical assistance that is required to do so.

The Farm Service Agency implements several highly successful conservation programs. In particular, these include the Conservation Reserve Program, the Emergency Conservation Program, and the Grassland Preserve Program, which we administer jointly with NRCS. Soon we will also be administering the Voluntary Public Access Program authorized under the farm bill.

Today, I would like to discuss briefly how FSA works with technical assistance providers in our major conservation programs. Much of our technical assistance is done in concert with NRCS, and we greatly appreciate their efforts as well as the efforts of our many conservation partners.

The Conservation Reserve Program provides cost-share assistance and annual rental payments to farmers and ranchers to establish conservation covers, and a conservation plan is required for each CRP participant. FSA has an agreement within NRCS to provide conservation planning for CRP participants specifying responsibilities of each agency. FSA has a similar agreement with the Forest Service to provide conservation planning for CRP participants and with other Federal and state agencies to conduct monitoring, assessment, and evaluation of CRP practices.

Beginning in 2006, FSA has, in certain cases, used private contractors to redirect technical assistance when NRCS experiences an especially high workload. Several states have implemented pilot programs using private-sector firms to develop conservation plans.

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program is a component of CRP. It is a broad partnership between USDA, states, and private groups. As part of the CREP agreements, state agricultural and environmental agencies are required to contribute technical assistance resources for implementation. They also monitor outcomes. These agencies typically contribute about ten percent of the total project cost in the form of an in-kind technical assistance service.

The Emergency Conservation Program provides emergency funding and technical assistance for producers to rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters. Between six and seven percent of ECP funding is used for technical assistance. FSA provides technical assistance for certain practices, and has an agreement with NRCS to provide technical assistance for practices requiring greater conservation expertise. FSA also has an agreement with the Forest Service to provide technical assistance under ECP for hurricane disasters. In implementing ECP funding projects, FSA and NRCS staff work hand in hand at the local level.

On the Grassland Reserve Program, we jointly administer: GRP is a voluntary conservation program that emphasizes support for

working grazing operations and protection of grasslands. Applicants can apply for a rental contract or an easement with either NRCS or FSA. NRCS is responsible for administering the easement acquisition process, while we at FSA are responsible for rental contracts and payments.

NRCS provides leadership on regulations and provides on-the-ground technical assistance for both easements and rental contracts. FSA manages financial assistance funds, which includes making payments for rental contracts and easement acquisition. Both agencies collaborate on policy decisions and day-to-day program management.

Finally, I would like to touch briefly on savings derived through FSA and NRCS coordination on programs. FSA and NRCS have significantly reduced technical assistance costs over the past 10 years. Through automation and some of the streamlining changes that Chief White has mentioned, we have developed collaboratively between the two agencies. The cost of general CRP sign-up activities were reduced by approximately 30 percent per contract, and the cost of continuous sign-up activities were reduced by approximately 18 percent per contract.

The re-enrollment of expiring 2007 through 2010 CRP contracts offered additional opportunities for streamlining and cost savings. FSA worked with NRCS and agreed to make adjustments to the NRCS model estimates to reflect time savings on CRP contracts with forestry-only practices. This reduced technical assistance costs by 29 percent per contract.

These are just a couple of examples of the way we have worked together to work on efficiencies and cost savings.

In conclusion, technical assistance, as you mentioned, plays an incredibly vital role in our conservation programs. Both FSA and NRCS understand the nature of sound technical assistance for these programs. We will continue to work closely with NRCS as well as our other Federal and non-Federal partners to ensure that FSA program participants receive the highest quality technical assistance to meet program requirements.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify and welcome your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Coppess follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JONATHAN W. COPPESS, ADMINISTRATOR, FARM SERVICE AGENCY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss implementation of conservation programs and the technical assistance required to place conservation practices on the ground.

The Farm Service Agency (FSA) implements several highly successful conservation programs. The largest of the conservation programs, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), has resulted in more than 31 million acres of grasses, trees, riparian buffers, filter strips, restored wetlands, and high-value wildlife habitat. The Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) provides emergency funding to farmers and ranchers to rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters and for carrying out water conservation measures in periods of severe drought. FSA and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) jointly administer the Grassland Reserve Program, which is a voluntary conservation program that emphasizes support for working grazing operations, enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity, and protection of grassland under threat of conversion to other uses.

As soon as the interim rule is published FSA is prepared to begin administering the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentives Program, a newly authorized

2008 Farm Bill program. This program will provide grants to states and tribal governments to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch, and forest land to voluntarily make their land available for public access for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting or fishing. The funding for this program is administered by state and tribal governments. We expect the interim regulation for this program to be published this summer, and also have scheduled several tribal consultation sessions across the United States beginning in August, to receive input from tribes before we draft the final rule.

To implement our conservation programs, FSA relies on technical assistance from NRCS, the Forest Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Energy, State Forestry agencies, state agricultural, fish and wildlife and environmental departments, conservation districts, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector. These partners help us with numerous activities that fall under the umbrella of technical assistance, including eligibility determinations, conservation plan development, conservation practice development and implementation, outreach to farmers and ranchers, and monitoring the impacts of conservation programs.

Today, I will discuss how FSA works with technical assistance providers in each of our major conservation programs. Much of our technical assistance interaction is with NRCS, and we greatly appreciate their efforts, as well as the efforts of our many other conservation partners.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

The Conservation Reserve Program provides cost share assistance and annual rental payments to farmers and ranchers to establish conservation covers. Numerous conservation practices are available to farmers and ranchers, including grasses, trees, filter strips, riparian buffers, wetland restoration, and high-value wildlife habitat. A conservation plan is required for each CRP participant.

FSA has an agreement with NRCS to provide conservation planning for CRP participants, specifying the responsibilities of each agency. For instance, NRCS is responsible for certain technical eligibility determinations and for developing conservation plans, while FSA is responsible for compliance determinations and consultations with other Federal agencies, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agreement also specifies reimbursement rates based on NRCS's Cost of Programs model. The current agreement was negotiated after the 2008 Farm Bill and is in effect through 2012.

Prior to the beginning of each fiscal year, FSA and NRCS meet to discuss anticipated needs for the coming year and develop a cost estimate. FSA reimbursed NRCS \$62.3 million in Fiscal Year 2008 and \$56.3 million in Fiscal Year 2009.

FSA has a similar agreement with the Forest Service to provide conservation planning for participants installing tree practices under both the CRP and the Emergency Forestry Conservation Reserve Program. CCC funds are provided to the Forest Service, which distributes those funds to State Forestry agencies in the form of technical assistance grants. State Forestry employees provide technical assistance services. FSA is reimbursing the Forest Service for \$1.9 million in both 2008 and 2009.

Beginning in 2006, FSA explored providing technical assistance through private sector vendors. Private sector vendors can be used to redirect technical assistance when NRCS experiences high workload and would have difficulty providing timely completion of CRP conservation plans. Under FSA authorization, Kansas, Nebraska, Washington, North Dakota and Minnesota have all implemented pilot programs using private sector firms to develop conservation plans. Though the scope of these projects has been limited, we generally do not find that the private sector plans cost less than equivalent plans developed by NRCS. We are, however, generally pleased with the quality and timing of the plans developed by these partners.

Although the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) is not one of our "traditional" technical service providers, I would like to mention their efforts. The 2008 Farm Bill provided direction for the Secretary, acting through NASS, to conduct an annual survey of cash rental rates. We have coordinated with NASS and will plan to use their statistically reliable cash rent data as a basis for establishing CRP rental rates.

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), a component of CRP, is a partnership among USDA, tribes, states and, in some cases, private groups. By combining CRP resources with state, tribal, and private programs, CREP provides farmers and ranchers with a sound financial package for conserving and enhancing natural resources.

State agricultural and environmental agencies are required to contribute significant technical assistance resources for CREP development and implementation, including outreach, conservation planning, and engineering services. They also monitor CREP outcomes. State agricultural and environmental agencies typically contribute ten percent of the total project cost in the form of “in kind” technical assistance services.

Emergency Conservation Program

The Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) provides emergency funding and technical assistance for farmers and ranchers to rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters and for carrying out emergency water conservation measures in periods of severe drought. Funding for ECP is discretionary and is generally made available in supplemental appropriations acts. Between six and seven percent of ECP funding is used for technical assistance, or approximately \$1 million annually.

FSA provides technical assistance for certain ECP practices, including debris removal, fence restoration and grading and shaping of damaged land. FSA has an agreement with NRCS to provide technical assistance for practices requiring greater conservation expertise, including restoration of conservation structures and other installations as well as drought emergency measures. FSA also has an agreement with the Forest Service to provide technical assistance for ECP for hurricane disasters that affect tree stands.

Timing of this assistance is critical to meet the oftentimes urgent needs of producers facing damage from disasters. FSA and NRCS staffs work hand in hand at the state and county level to provide efficient and timely service to producers. For instance, FSA and NRCS staffs in Tennessee are working at the state and county level to provide assistance to farmers affected by recent flooding.

Grassland Reserve Program

FSA and NRCS jointly administer the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). GRP is a voluntary conservation program that emphasizes support for working grazing operations, enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity, and protection of grassland. Applications may be filed for a rental contract or an easement with NRCS or FSA.

Participants voluntarily limit future development and cropping uses of the land while retaining the right to conduct common grazing practices and operations related to the production of forage and seeding, subject to certain restrictions during nesting seasons.

NRCS is responsible for administering the easement acquisition process, while FSA is responsible for rental contracts and payments. NRCS provides leadership on regulations and provides all on-the-ground technical assistance for both easements and rental contracts. FSA manages financial assistance funds, which includes making payments for rental contracts and easement acquisition. Both agencies collaborate on policy decisions and day-to-day program management.

Monitoring, Assessment, and Evaluation

Monitoring, assessment, and evaluation is necessary both for CRP assessment and reporting, and for providing sound science essential for effectively administering CRP and other conservation programs. The need for monitoring, assessment, and evaluation of conservation programs has been recognized by Congress in the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills, and the 2008 Farm Bill includes language defining technical assistance to include “. . . activities, processes, tools, and agency functions needed to support delivery of technical services such as . . . monitoring and effects analyses.”

FSA uses Federal, state, university, and other organizations to conduct monitoring, assessment, and evaluation of the effects of conservation programs. The results are used to improve program delivery, target program resources, quantify program benefits, and communicate program accomplishments. Between 2003 and 2008, FSA used \$2.25 million from multiple funding sources to identify, quantify and document environmental benefits generated by CRP. These analytical results have been used: to develop conservation initiatives using highly beneficial CRP practices; to develop environmental goals for the FSA strategic plan; and to guide CRP decisions, such as informing USDA’s decision not to permit ‘early outs’ from CRP contracts in 2008.

CRP monitoring and evaluation activities are coordinated with, and complement, USDA’s Conservation Effects and Assessment Program (CEAP). CEAP is a multi-agency, multi-year program tasked with ascertaining the effectiveness of conservation practices, such as those implemented under CRP, in providing environmental benefits.

Other Technical Assistance

FSA also implements programs to review potential exposure to potential hazardous materials associated with the operation of former grain storage facilities or associated with foreclosed properties. FSA uses private sector engineering firms and agreements with the Department of Energy to use Argonne National laboratory to conduct groundwater site investigations and to develop remediation protocols.

Technical Assistance Savings and Coordination

FSA and NRCS have significantly reduced technical assistance costs over the past 10 years. FSA, with assistance from NRCS, automated the environmental benefits index calculations for the CRP general sign-up in 2003. In addition, FSA and NRCS automated field-level information regarding soil erodibility and other features, allowing the automation of eligibility determinations and reducing costs. FSA and NRCS further streamlined the tasks necessary to implement technical assistance for CRP. Because of these automation and other streamlining changes, the costs of general sign-up activities were reduced by approximately 30 percent per contract and the costs of continuous sign-up activities by approximately 18 percent per contract.

The re-enrollment of expiring 2007–2010 CRP contracts offered additional opportunities for streamlining and cost savings. FSA and NRCS reviewed the tasks required for re-enrollment activities and agreed to implement changes that resulted in significant savings for all re-enrollment contracts. In addition, FSA worked with NRCS and agreed to make adjustments to NRCS model estimates to reflect time savings on CRP contracts with forestry-only practices. Technical assistance costs for these contracts were reduced by 29 percent per contract.

Further, FSA and NRCS work together to facilitate implementation of their various program-related workload constraints. For example, FSA provides projections of potential CRP enrollment activities to NRCS to help NRCS plan for potential workload demand changes.

Conclusion

Technical assistance is a vital component of effectively and efficiently placing conservation practices on the ground. Each form of technical assistance—including timely and efficient conservation plan development, broad outreach to current and potential program participants, and monitoring and assessment on conservation program impacts—helps conservation programs achieve their intended purpose. FSA works closely with Federal and non-Federal partners to ensure all FSA program participants receive high quality technical assistance to meet program requirements.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Coppess.

Mr. White, as Mr. Goodlatte mentioned in his opening statement, he and I represent regions within the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. We just introduced a bill, H.R. 5509, that we believe builds on the success of the farm bill program and would bring some regulatory certainty for our farmers. We believe additional technical assistance and third-party providers will play an integral role in helping farmers comply with regulations. So it is important that the system is working.

Can you tell us, are there particular areas or regions that have an overly complex system of delivering conservation? Are there areas or regions with a successful conservation delivery system that could be replicated and that we can learn from? And how is the agency working to make sure technical service providers are available to help provide assistance?

Mr. WHITE. Yes, sir. Mr. Holden, what you and Mr. Goodlatte have put in that bill is absolutely, in my view, vital. The concept of certainty is exactly what our producers need.

When you look at the Chesapeake Bay and they talk about millions of tons of this and millions of tons of that, what does it mean to a producer? I can't get my arms around it. What we have to do is be able to give the producers the certainty that if they do these practices on their farms that helps the water quality, nobody is

going to mess with them. And I just want to thank you and applaud both of you so much for doing that.

Regarding different areas of the country, we are geographically challenged in some areas like in Alaska or maybe Guam. We have the northern tier of states where you have a limited amount of time you can work. So there are limiting factors out there. But, as we move across the country, we have the staff and the ability to effectively address those issues, sir.

And as far as the emerging issues, we will have to find a way to accommodate them within the existing system.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Coppess, in your opening statement, you address a number of ways that NRCS and FSA are working together with limited resources and particularly NRCS staff shortages. Can both of you elaborate on and be more specific about how you are working together to make sure technical assistance is available?

Mr. COPPESS. Certainly, and thank you.

The bulk of that work obviously happens at the field level. And we are quite proud of—I think both of us are quite proud of the service centers and the work that they do in the counties across the country where NRCS provides the technical assistance on CRP and the BCP program especially; how we sort out getting the sign-ups, the contracts through; and then working with NRCS very closely on technical assistance, on conservation plans in particular for CRP. I think it is probably one of the biggest workload areas that we see with them.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. White.

Mr. WHITE. I would just echo what Jonathan says. We do have a good working relationship. We have some defined roles that seem to be working well together. We get along well. I think from Maine to Hawaii most of our field offices get along, and I hope that we continue with that.

To be more frank, some of this kind of bothers me a little bit, because I don't want folks trying to put a wedge between us. We have enough challenges and enough work out there, and we need to work together, sir.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Coppess, if you could just get back to me on the matter we talked about before the hearing started, the transferring of funding from one CREP program in western Pennsylvania to the lower Susquehanna CREP—

Mr. COPPESS. Absolutely.

The CHAIRMAN.—and the concerns that producers have brought to my attention about rental rates.

Mr. COPPESS. We will look into it right away.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

The chair recognizes the gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Goodlatte.

Mr. GOODLATTE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, welcome to both of you.

Mr. White, I appreciate some of your comments regarding NRCS programs that are voluntary and incentive-based. We have worked hard to keep it that way, to keep the incentives there for farmers to do the right thing, because they have a lot of incentives on their own to do the right thing as well.

And then you, just a moment ago in response to the Chairman's question with regard to our concerns about what is going on with the Chesapeake Bay, you said, "If they do these things, nobody is going to mess with them." Would that that was the case. I absolutely agree with that principle, that if you do the right thing, nobody should mess with you. But we are confronted with those here in this Congress who think that they should mandate actions that will have an impact not only on those who "aren't" doing these things, but also on those who are and who have made tremendous progress for which they are not getting proper credit.

The fact of the matter is that the phosphorous and nitrogen that are flowing into the Chesapeake Bay—at least the portion coming off from farms—has been reduced by half in the last few decades. And it is entirely because of responsible management on the part of farmers who have undertaken, both on their own and with the help of the NRCS, voluntary, incentive-based efforts to keep the Bay free and clear.

The Chairman and I are committed to continuing to work in that direction and making sure that farmers not only can help to improve the health of the Chesapeake Bay, but also help the health of the Chesapeake Bay and the economy of their regions by staying in business, by keeping those farms in farmland rather than being developed for other things, which are probably the greater source of difficulties for the Bay, that dramatic population growth in the region.

But in that regard, in terms of helping them, one of the things that I have noted is the number of certified technical service providers is a little over 1,100 today, and I believe that is nearly $\frac{1}{2}$ as many certified TSPs compared to 2004. What do you believe has contributed to the drop in TSPs, and how can this program be improved?

Mr. WHITE. One digression, sir, I wanted to let you know, last time you were here you kind of took me to the woodshed a little bit on this six percent CCPI. I want to let you know, I have met with our staff—I felt awful. I couldn't sleep for a couple of days—and we are going to manage that thing so we stay below that six percent. So I just wanted to let you know that.

Mr. GOODLATTE. Well, we appreciate that. That means more resources available to farmers, and that is a good goal.

Mr. WHITE. So the TSPs, I will just say, we could have done one heck of a better job. The registration requirements were cumbersome. We were having them do online training through AgLearn, and some of it wasn't appropriate to them. We would have a national agreement with, say, a group, and then there would be state-level requirements that were added to that.

And we are trying to address that. We actually did a survey with the TSPs, and we found out the things that were wrong. We have tried to address a lot of them in the TSP final rule.

And let me just talk about the state requirements.

Mr. GOODLATTE. So you are saying that you think with better management you can provide better services with fewer personnel.

Mr. WHITE. Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I do.

We understand on the state-level requirements we need that better consistency. We have it now that if the state has an additional

requirement it has to come to Washington and we have to approve it. And if it is not required by state law, they better have a good reason. You have a lot of folks coming after me that can address this with great specificity, but we hope to really improve that process, Mr. Goodlatte.

Mr. GOODLATTE. Thank you.

Do you find that there is a cultural problem with NRCS officials who are suited to provide technical assistance, but may have difficulty providing program administration? And, if so, should this be corrected without hiring additional administrative employees?

Mr. WHITE. You know, when we talk about the integration of our systems, I don't know how you carve out, okay, this is piece X and this is piece Y. It has to be part of a seamless system. That is what we are working towards. As far as the administrative efforts and the technical efforts are blended into a seamless unit, that is what our streamlining is trying to do, and I think we can accomplish that.

Mr. GOODLATTE. Thank you. Great. And I hope you sleep better after this hearing than the last one. I hate to think I might be responsible for any sleepless nights.

Mr. WHITE. Well, sometimes you need a little incentive.

Mr. GOODLATTE. Right.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. I thank the gentleman.

We have three votes coming up. I think we have time for the gentlewoman from South Dakota for any questions.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Well, thank you for the testimony. We appreciate your insights.

I would like to talk just a little bit about some of what is going on in South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota. We have some wetlands issues, as you know; and we have a lot of producers in South Dakota who are seeking wetlands determinations. They are simply waiting for certification from NRCS.

Unfortunately, it appears to me that NRCS needs some assistance in certifying these wetland determinations since only the conservation technical assistance accounts can be used to certify them. So, as it stands, those accounts are used to provide planning before wetland determinations in addition to salaries for over half of the NRCS employees in the state. And for this reason there just aren't enough funds in that account to allow states like South Dakota—again, others in our region—to properly address the wetland determinations in a timely manner. In eastern South Dakota alone, there are over 2,000 determinations waiting for certification.

So, Mr. White, what plans do you have to allow more technical assistance, or the agency more broadly, what the Secretary may have for NRCS to determine the wetlands? Is it possible to allow more flexibility with funds allocated to NRCS so that they are able to assess all of these determinations with other funds?

And, finally, would be it possible to allow a special increase in conservation technical assistance accounts for states like South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota, who have this lingering challenge?

Mr. WHITE. The answer is, yes, ma'am, we can do that. We have a provision in the President's budget request for extra money on

what we are calling little soil and water action teams. I think the House approved \$12.5 million.

What we would do, Ms. Sandlin, you know how soil surveys are kind of done, where we would put a team of soil scientists in a county and they would actually work themselves out of a job, and then you would move them to another county and they would do the soil survey there. This is kind of what we are thinking, where we would put an agronomist, biologist, engineer—whatever is needed—to actually address that.

I talked to the people in South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota, that if this goes all the way through, that is probably where we would put some of these extra teams to just work on that. They wouldn't have to do anything else, do these wetland determinations for these producers, because we can't survive with a couple thousand backed up. So, ma'am, I hope to address that.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Well, I appreciate that, and we look forward to working closely with you. You have some great folks in the office there in South Dakota that we work closely with, with my constituents who are wanting these determinations sooner rather than later.

As Mr. Coppess knows, we have folks through his agency that are concerned about the calculation for the SURE payments and the delays that we have experienced there. This leads me to my final question for both of you, and that is, the functions that each of your agencies deliver and the reimbursement activity that this creates. Could either of you talk about the administrative burden that you believe may exist, and how we can find some efficiencies as it relates to how the reimbursement rates are calculated?

Mr. COPPES. Well, thank you. And certainly, as you mentioned with SURE and quite a few programs, we have no shortage of struggles in trying to get some complex programs out. Administratively, we have done everything we can to try and alleviate some of those, but we bump up against various hurdles as we do.

I think the basic concept that we go through in using NRCS on the technical service side, and then reimbursing through CCC funding and all that, we see a lot of that working and working quite well. One of the things that I have noticed since I have been at the agency, and one of the reasons why it is our top priority right now, is this modernization effort. Part of what we struggle with is trying to work through years and years of processes that have not been improved, and on very antiquated systems that do not allow us to necessarily communicate as efficiently and as well as we need to within NRCS, with RMA, with the other agencies that we work with.

So as we go through this process over the next few years we are very much trying to clean that up and improve how we work, not just internally, and not just at the field level, but across the country and with other agencies. I think that we will see significant improvement on time at the countertop, on time for sign-up, on time from sign-up to payment, and every bit of that process.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. My time has almost expired. What is the timetable for the modernization effort to be completed, assuming you have all the resources you need?

Mr. COPPESS. Making the big assumption that we continue to get the funding we need to complete it, we are looking at final contract pieces in 2013, and a lot of the big modernization push being completed by 2014. That is the time-frame we are looking at. We are always looking to speed that up.

One of the most important things about how we are operating this modernization effort is it is not going to be built in the dark and rolled out at one time. We are pushing very hard to take care of those things we can clean up now on the short term, get those out of the way, start making those improvements so that our customers see it, so that our field employees see it, that you all can see that this is progressing as we want to.

So while the end date is never going to be as clear as we want it to be, the most important thing is that we make that progress as we go, and that we demonstrate that progress as we go.

Ms. HERSETH SANDLIN. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair thanks the gentlewoman.

We have about 7 minutes, since it is the first vote of the day, I think we have time for the gentleman from Missouri's questions.

Mr. LUETKEMEYER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My question is for Mr. White. Mr. White, you are a fellow Missourian. You know where I come from and the problems that we have with the Missouri River and the Mississippi River with regards to the Corps of Engineers and their dictates from the Fish and Wildlife to increase the habitat for the pallid sturgeon. They are digging these 20–30' deep chutes, 100' wide, 300' long, 20–30 acres per mile, and they are dumping this soil in our River.

Now, we had a letter to Secretary Vilsack to discuss this with him. And during a Committee hearing he sat in the chair between you and Mr. Coppess, and he made the commitment to work with us on the various issues we had. And this is extremely important. You are spending \$80 million a year right now studying the hypoxia issue in the lower Mississippi River basin, and this is a part of it, and yet we are dumping soil in there.

I have a copy of the letter; and, Mr. Chairman, I would like to enter it into the record.

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection.

[The document referred to is located on p. 67.]

Mr. LUETKEMEYER. He said in there that—despite his commitment he stated that, “It is highly unlikely that the relatively insignificant temporary discharge of sediments and nutrients from the chute and backwater restorations has any significant bearing on the hypoxia issue in the Gulf of Mexico.”

Mr. White, this doesn't make sense. Number one, he is not working with us. Number two, he is not recognizing the issue of the sediment that \$80 million study is out there to work on. And, number three, if those things are not important, then why in the world are we fining our farmers who live along this, who allow some sediment inadvertently to drop into the river? Can you answer those questions, please?

Mr. WHITE. Well, if anyone dropped the ball on working with you it would be me, because I was at that hearing, and I should have followed up, sir. And I will make that commitment now.

I think what we have in this particular instance, it strikes me that there is really kind of a conflict between a couple of different laws, the Endangered Species Act, which says you need the sediment in there for the birds that nest on the sandbars and some of the fish that live there, and, as you well know, under the Clean Water Act, you have to get a 404 permit to dredge and fill or dump any sediment. And which one takes supremacy? USDA does not administer either one of those laws.

So what I would commit to you, sir, is that—if we could meet and if I could get some specificity on how I can carry this issue forward for you and for the producers you represent to try and seek a resolution.

Mr. LUETKEMEYER. Well, what is your answer to the \$80 million study here that we are working on over the next 3 years with—let me get the agency here—well, it is with your group—to work on this, and yet we are dumping sediment in there and the Secretary doesn't think it is important. Why are we spending \$80 million if it is not important?

Mr. WHITE. Well, I think that any type of scientific knowledge advances us. And for that reason, particularly on something so critical as this that we have the actual science that can inform our subsequent decisions. I think that would be money well spent if it points us a way out of this or towards a solution.

I understand your frustration with this, and I understand how, on the face of it, it doesn't seem to make sense that you would dump sediment at the same time you are trying to control sediment.

Mr. LUETKEMEYER. Well, you are fining my farmers who live along this who inadvertently or unintentionally dump small amounts. They are getting fined for it, yet the Corps is dumping 548 million tons. I mean, that is thousands of acres of soil that could be in production. They were digging slews, chutes for fish and birds and whatever here that doesn't make any sense.

Mr. WHITE. Right. Well, I know that if we look at the Missouri River a long time ago, it used to meander back and forth on about a mile floodplain. And the amount of sediment it carries now because we kind of channelized it a bit is, like, I don't know, 75 percent less than it used to carry, and because of the levees and whatnot, we have actually stopped some of that meandering. So I know that the contention is that they are only putting in a fraction of the sediment that the river would have taken prior to manipulation, and the study will help us find out better answers to all of these.

Mr. LUETKEMEYER. Over the last several years, their intention was to stop the influx or the putting into the river the sediment, to lower the sediment that is in there, and now we are going the other direction, sir.

Mr. WHITE. Yes, sir, I understand.

Mr. LUETKEMEYER. I apologize for running over here, but I appreciate and look forward to your discussion on the side with my staff and myself.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

The CHAIRMAN. We will recess and return right after the votes. There are three votes.

[Recess.]

The CHAIRMAN. The Subcommittee will reconvene.

The chair recognizes the gentlewoman from Pennsylvania.

Mrs. DAHLKEMPER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. White and Mr. Coppess, for joining us today. I wanted to ask you a bit about the efficiencies that you are trying to improve, the streamlining initiatives that you have.

I had a constituent from my district who had contacted my office, and he basically was concerned that there was a number of duplications that were occurring, duplications in paperwork with the FSA and NRCS, and finding it very tedious and sometimes unnecessary.

And so, just what actions is the NRCS undertaking as part of your streamlining initiative to simplify conservation deliveries? If you would just give me some information on that, Mr. White, I would appreciate it.

Mr. WHITE. Yes, ma'am. Part of this initiative is to—well, one of the things that would really help your client is, next year, when we implement this client gateway. By the end of next year we should have a pilot out there, where a producer at home can apply on one form without leaving their house. The same form would be available in the office for people who don't have Internet connectivity.

But it would just be one form. That person would be able to see their documents, their contracts, their plans, and all kinds of stuff like that. I think that would be a huge advantage. And we do have one form now for applying for all conservation programs. And if we can get that online, it would be even better.

Mrs. DAHLKEMPER. So that will be online soon, or not?

Mr. WHITE. The projections are we will roll the pilot out toward the end of 2011. There has to be a lot of IT work done between now and then.

Mrs. DAHLKEMPER. What are the barriers to that? Obviously, some IT issues?

Mr. WHITE. Yes, ma'am. It is a programming issue. I think we have adequate funding; we are trying to fund the effort. But, essentially, it is mostly the diversity—we have a lot of stand-alone software that are wonderful, but the first place they have been integrated is at the field office.

I will give you a specific example. The WIN-PST program tells us how pesticides migrate through every soil. So we can tell if there is a problem with high groundwater or something like that. So I am working on your conservation plan in something called Tool Kit. And I see that you use glyphosate on a five percent loam. Well, I have to get out of Tool Kit, go into WIN-PST, find out how glyphosate moves through, get that information, go back into Tool Kit and put it in. And that is the kind of stuff that we have to make seamless.

Mrs. DAHLKEMPER. They can't talk to each other, basically.

Mr. WHITE. Yes, the first place they are being integrated is at the field office, and they should be integrated up here. And that is what this effort will do.

Mrs. DAHLKEMPER. Okay. Are there any other barriers that you see to provide a more effective and efficient delivery of conservation?

Mr. WHITE. Well, probably, the standard answer from any Fed worth his or her salt would be to say "I need more," but I am not saying "more." I think we can manage this. I think I have seen enough where, if we can get these efficiencies done, we will be able to do the job, ma'am.

Mrs. DAHLKEMPER. Mr. Coppess, do you have anything to add regarding that?

Mr. COPPESS. Well, thank you. And some of what Chief White was explaining sounds familiar with just different terms and different computer problems, or different software link-up problems. That is a big part of it.

Our system is antiquated. You know, your accounting office is basically an island in the IT system, and it has no way to connect across counties. And so, many producers that have land in two counties, including my family, has to go from county to county. And, oftentimes, in the offices, we have them printing off from one printer, to get off one system, to take it over and do a sign-up on another computer to use the other system. So these things have just been sitting for too long without that modernization and that upgrade.

And then around all of that are these forms and processes. And farmers are very candid in their feedback about what they feel are too many forms, too many signatures, too many things they have to go through. And a lot of that is just built up over time and over changes in programs and new programs being added in and new requirements.

And so, what we want to do, as we go through this modernization effort, we want to take the opportunity that, as we clean up or improve our IT system, that we clean up everything around it, that we actually simplify these processes and this system so that we are not trying to modernize something that doesn't make sense when it is on paper.

So it is a big process. Obviously, we need to have that kind of linkage with NRCS, in what we do, with RMA, with other agencies. And that is part of what is driving the way we are putting all of this together as we go through the system.

Mrs. DAHLKEMPER. All right. Well, I thank you both for that answer, and my time has expired.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair thanks the gentlewoman and recognizes the gentleman from Kansas.

Mr. MORAN. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Chief White, thank you for your presence here today.

Mr. Coppess, nice to see you once again. I don't know that I have any questions about the timing of the CRP sign-up, but maybe you will have something else to report in that regard.

Chief White, I was particularly pleased to hear you say that you had sleepless nights after being questioned by Mr. Goodlatte. That is encouraging to me, that someone is paying attention to the issues that we raise, and one of those I raised with you last year in my office. I very much appreciate our conversation. It was about the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program, AWEP. And we talked about the statutory requirements of the law that would give priority to water quality issues.

In the first round of AWEPP applications, Kansas was shut out, in my opinion, in large part because the priority was not given by NRCS, as required by law. You indicated that that was going to be corrected. And I assume, as far as I know, that is the case. Is that true?

Mr. WHITE. Yes, sir. I think you received about three of them this time around.

Mr. MORAN. That is encouraging to hear. Thank you.

Mr. WHITE. More sleepless nights.

Mr. MORAN. Good.

The second part of my question, though, relates to another topic that we talked about, and that is about conversion of agricultural land—irrigation agricultural land to dryland farming. And the statute says that NRCS approved conservation activity for, “the conversion of agricultural land from irrigated farming to dryland farming.”

I am not aware that NRCS has yet approved conservation activity to carry out that—mandate that language. Is that true, and is there something in the works?

Mr. WHITE. Mr. Moran, I think that some of the AWEPPs that we approved this year may deal with that very issue. I will have to check and make double-darn sure.

But beyond that, we also were able to send some extra EQIP funding out to the Ogallala. And I will just have to see how exactly they used it, but it was for the water conservation in that particular area. And I will have to follow up with specifically what that was, sir.

Mr. MORAN. Okay. I appreciate that very much and look forward to continuing this dialogue.

And then let me ask a question about EQIP. One of the things that troubled me in Senate comments in regard to EQIP was that we can take money out of EQIP and use it for spending in other areas. That was part of the conversation that took place in the Senate Agriculture and Nutrition Committee.

And I have done at least checking in Kansas, and, from what I can tell, EQIP funding is over-subscribed, meaning that there are more applications than funds available.

And so my question is, is NRCS on track to utilize all EQIP funds allocated in the farm bill? And if that is not the case, is there a process by which you can reallocate funds not spent elsewhere to states like Kansas that have pending applications?

Mr. WHITE. Generally, every year we have a backlog of EQIP. And we are on track to use all the appropriated funds. As you know, what is authorized is not necessarily what is appropriated. There is that gap there. But, yes, sir, we are on track to use it.

Mr. MORAN. So the suggestion, at least by a Senator, that we can use EQIP funds to pay for food and nutrition programs because there are excess funds in EQIP, there are no excess funds, is that true?

Mr. WHITE. Not of the appropriated amounts.

Mr. MORAN. Thank you for your testimony. I think that is the conclusion of my questions.

Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. I thank the gentleman and recognize the gentleman from North Carolina.

Mr. KISSELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Chief White and Mr. Coppess, for being with us today.

This question I am going to ask has been touched on by several of my colleagues, and if you all could add to this, I would appreciate it. We have talked about how—and understand that our farmers are great conservationists, stewards of the land. But yet, there is still a lot of regulatory pressure being put upon the agriculture community.

How, in our conservation programs, are you able to help the ag community deal and cope with and respond to, in an effective way, these regulatory pressures that are continually coming to them?

And, Chief White, if you can go first, please.

Mr. WHITE. Yes, sir. And I will try to be brief.

We have an actual statutory stipulation in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program that says one of the purposes of EQIP is to help producers meet or avoid regulation. And I don't mean avoid like hiding; I mean avoid like, there is not a problem here for you guys to even regulate. So that is one of the driving factors.

We have tried to work with regulatory agencies to that end, like the sage-grouse initiative in the West. The sage-grouse is on the candidate list which could be listed as endangered species. We want to avoid having that bird even listed because of the impact it could have on our ranchers out there.

So we are working with the Fish and Wildlife Service, and we are kind of mirroring what Mr. Holden and Mr. Goodlatte have conceptualized in their bill, the concept of certainty. So if a rancher does A, B, C, and D that help the sage-grouse, that person will not have to worry if the sage-grouse becomes listed under the Endangered Species Act. We meet regularly with the ag groups and the conservation groups. We are working with the EPA and Fish and Wildlife and all the other bodies to try and find ways that we can effectively use the conservation practices to help producers with these regulatory requirements.

In California, in Mr. Costa's area, the air quality is just huge for these producers. So there is a way that we can help, sir, and we are actively engaged in that.

Mr. KISSELL. Okay.

And Mr. Coppess?

Mr. COPPESS. Sure, thank you.

In much the same way that Chief White was mentioning, under CRP, particularly the continuous sign-up authorizations and capabilities that we have, we have tried to maintain some flexibility and to try to move those around and do some of the same or similar-type issues with both sage-grouse, lesser prairie chicken, in some of these areas where they are in a threatened situation or endangered situation.

But we can help farmers then, using the continuous sign-up capabilities, to get that habitat in place, to use CRP continuous to then improve habitats so that they have less of a problem to worry about, from the regulation side of it.

I think we have looked at a myriad of things on using filter strips and runoff and waterways and those sort of things, and how we can continue to be flexible and maintain that flexibility under continuous sign-up.

Of course, the general sign-up, when we get to it, hopefully in the near future, also allows us to take into consideration under the Environmental Benefits Index how we best target the limited acres and funding that we have to help the producer with the various issues that they face.

And so, we continue to use that flexibility, to use all of our authority to try and help producers out on the ground where they need it most in these areas. I think, as you do that, sort of, the ounce of prevention helps a lot further down the line instead of trying to correct problems after they have become a problem, to try to prevent them from becoming a problem.

Mr. KISSELL. Thank you.

Chief White, you had mentioned earlier in your testimony about some great success stories of resource conservation, maybe Upper Mississippi Basin, things like this.

Sort of real quickly, because my time is running out, how did those come about? And how are we taking those lessons to other places?

Mr. WHITE. A lot of it is just hard work over the years, from the 1940s, the 1950s, the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s. Our data for the Upper Mississippi show that, if it were not for conservation practices, sediment would be 70 percent worse in our rivers. Actually, the number is 69 percent, to be precise.

But it is the terraces, the buffers, the waterways, the conservation tillage that the men and women who own and operate that land have put on to conserve the resources, not just for us today but for sustainability so our kids have the bounty we have today.

Mr. KISSELL. Thank you, sir.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair thanks the gentleman and recognizes the gentleman from Idaho.

Mr. MINNICK. No questions.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman passes.

The gentleman from California?

Mr. COSTA. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I want to, first of all, thank Chief White and the folks there with the efforts that have been made recently with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, not only with the European grapevine moth and the funding for additional detection, but the eradication in recent weeks is very important.

In addition to that, we appreciate the continuing support on, as you noted, the air quality issues that are a tremendous problem. With over 300 crops growing in one of the most productive agricultural regions in the entire country, nonetheless we, as a closed-in air basin, have tremendous air quality issues we have to deal with. The Nisei Farmers League, the Grape and Tree Fruit League, and the California Table Grape Commission, as well as our local ag commissioners, appreciate the partnership in working together.

I have a couple of questions I want to go in, as we delve into these issues, Chief White. You know the drought and the air qual-

ity issues have created tremendous strain on the agriculture economy in our valley. It is my understanding that, as it relates to air quality specifically, the number of qualified participants—well, I know this—clearly outweigh the availability of resources, that there are still 521 high-priority applications that remain unfunded.

Is there any way to get to that backlog in Fiscal Year 2010?

Mr. WHITE. There is, in any fiscal year, give and take. You know, some states will say, “We don’t need this much.” Other states like Kansas say, “Good gracious, send it our way.” So between now and September, we will be doing stuff like that, and it is quite possible we will be able to get more funding out there.

I know that—help me with the number, but what we did out there last year was the equivalent of removing, like, 153,000 cars from the road every year, just in the air quality effort.

Mr. COSTA. Yes. No, it was significant.

Mr. WHITE. And if we can do something like that again, what I am hearing is that that air quality board might not even have to write ag as a part of those regulations they do out there. I don’t know if that is true or not.

Mr. COSTA. On those 521 remaining high-priority projects that are completed, do you have sense of how many Tier 0 tractors and engines remain in the valley? Have your folks come back to you with any numbers?

Mr. WHITE. No. I know, at one time, it used to be, like, 2,000. When they had that sign-up last year, people, like, lined up around the building. I know, at one time, there was 2,000. And these 500, I assume, would be the highest ranked, which would have probably those Tier 0 or maybe Tier 1.

Mr. COSTA. I guess what we are concerned about is, if 521 applications from Fiscal Year 2010 end up having to be rolled into Fiscal Year 2011, will there be any funds left in Fiscal Year 2011 available for those additional applications for Tier 0 or Tier 1?

Mr. WHITE. Yes, sir. When you look at 2011, the farm bill stipulates that \$37 million is to be used under the Conservation Innovation Grants, subsection B for air quality. That is, sort of, the minimum. So that would be disbursed. California gets the bulk of that because of the regulatory requirements. But then, above and beyond that, if there are other EQIP funds, they would be eligible for that, as well, if we can—

Mr. COSTA. And, as you know, we have provided state funding, as well, to support that.

Mr. WHITE. Yes. You have state funding out there, and the producers. That is 50 percent of it, as well.

Mr. COSTA. Right. And we have gone from PM₁₀ to PM_{2.5}. And, I mean, we are doing a tremendous amount to deal with the issue.

Some have argued the USDA should not be engaged in such programs to help farmers meet these regulatory standards. What do you think is the USDA’s role in supporting farmers who are trying to comply with air quality regulations, whether they be in California or elsewhere?

Mr. WHITE. How we can provide them the technical assistance and the financial wherewithal to meet those requirements. And specifically in your area, aside from just the Tier 0 replacement effort, I know they have those—oh, they are kind of like radar, they

go on the back of a sprayer, that can read where a tree is and turn the sprayer on and off. That is, like, a 40 percent reduction in the volatile organic compounds can come from that technology alone.

So, as we look at new technology, we have to make it available to the producers at the local level.

Mr. COSTA. Well, we are going to need your continued support. We appreciate that. You know, some of us believe that the current set of conservation programs are very helpful, but, frankly, we need to do more. And I hope you concur.

Mr. WHITE. Yes, sir.

Mr. COSTA. My time has expired, but thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair thanks the gentleman.

Mr. COSTA. And we will continue to work with the Subcommittee and with both NRCS as well as FSA to help farmers throughout the country.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair thanks the gentleman.

The gentleman from Kansas, Mr. Moran, had a follow-up question.

Mr. MORAN. Mr. Chairman, thank you for extending me this opportunity.

Just, Mr. Coppess, anything to add in regard to that CRP sign-up date? Has anything happened since we last visited?

Mr. COPPESS. No, unfortunately, I have no new news on the general sign-up for CRP. We are currently—the final EIS is out, and we are currently in that no-action period where we are taking comments on the EIS. And so, again, we will move it as quickly as we can once those processes are completed.

Mr. MORAN. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair thanks our witnesses for their testimony and answers today.

And we would like to welcome our second panel: Mr. Steve Robinson, President of the National Association of Conservation Districts; Mr. John Lohr, Vice President, National Association of FSA County Office Employees; Mr. Ron Leathers, Public Finance Director, Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever; Dr. Scott Manley, Director of Conservation Programs, Ducks Unlimited; Dr. Robert Burns, Assistant Dean for Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Rural Development, the University of Tennessee; Mr. Steve Dlugosz—I hope I am pronouncing that right, sir—Certified Crop Advisor, Lead Agronomist, Harvest Land Cooperative, on behalf of the International Certified Crop Advisor Program and the American Society of Agronomy; Mr. William Braford, consulting forester, Bluechip Forestry, Natural Bridge Station, Virginia.

When everyone is seated and, Mr. Robinson, when you are ready, you may begin.

STATEMENT OF STEVE ROBINSON, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Mr. ROBINSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Good morning. I am Steve Robinson. I am a producer and President of the National Association of Conservation Districts. I own

and operate a 900 acre grain, soybean, and wheat family farm in Marysville, Ohio. And I have served as the local district supervisor of the Union County Soil and Water District since 1988.

I also manage Robinson Excavating, Inc., a family-owned excavation business, where we specialize in ponds, waterways, rock chutes, and many other conservation practices.

I am pleased to be here today on behalf of NACD to discuss conservation program administration and delivery.

As a producer, I have had the opportunity to utilize farm bill programs and assistance. Conservation practices on my farm include nine water and sediment control structures, three waterways, rock chutes, subsurface drainage, a wooded wetland, buffer strips, the use of no-till and strip-till on corn. And, in addition to these conservation practices, I have 200 acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.

For many of the conservation activities on my land, such as the multiple water and sediment control basins I have installed throughout my farm, I have not received any financial assistance. However, the technical assistance provided by NRCS has provided me with the necessary information and tools to install these important conservation measures based on good science.

As a contractor, I have seen firsthand how technical assistance helps landowners install conservation practices that reduce soil erosion and improve water quality. My work gives me the opportunity to see the results of technical assistance, from the conservation plan to the completed project on the ground. NACD's top priority is to encourage landowners to adopt conservation practices that provide countless public benefits such as clean air, clean water, healthy soils, and wildlife habitat.

Technical assistance delivery is the most critical element to conservation program participation and conservation practice adoption. However, as I talk with conservation district officials across the country, the constant message is there is not enough technical assistance funding to meet landowners' needs and demands.

Insufficient technical assistance is the main barrier to conservation practice adoption. While we recognize there has been an increased investment in conservation programs, this has come without an increase in staff needed to deliver additional assistance.

For example, the Maryland Soil Conservation Districts have identified a shortfall of 96 staff needed to meet the increased workload resulting from the Chesapeake Bay TMDL. These positions are critical to the adoption and implementation of conservation efforts that will help achieve and improve water quality in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

District and NRCS professionals can help these producers implement best management practices and mitigate regulatory burdens. The bottom line is that we support full funding for NRCS to deliver farm bill conservation programs, and meet the growing demand and need for technical assistance in concert with conservation districts, TSPs, and other partners.

In this rather complex environment, we should examine all potential improvements to effective, efficient conservation technical assistance delivery. We would like to see full accounting of staffing and technology needs required to fully implement farm bill con-

servation programs and accomplish our national and local conservation goals.

We seek the most direct and efficient structure for conservation program delivery. For that reason, we support the current consolidated conservation delivery with NRCS, and we will measure all ideas by these standards.

We at NACD have formed a Farm Bill Task Force to, in part, examine technical assistance requirements. And we will be taking a close look at the question of how to improve technical assistance delivery to farmers and ranchers. As you begin the work of writing the 2012 Farm Bill, we hope to closely work with your Committee to address this issue, and to ensure that there are appropriate funding mechanisms for technical assistance delivery.

Conservation districts are uniquely positioned to work with the NRCS, TSP, and others to expand technical assistance capacity. As we broaden and strengthen the traditional conservation partnership, conservation districts are already leveraging Federal funding to accelerate conservation application on the ground.

The general public expects clean air, clean water, healthy soils, and abundant wildlife habitat. As a nation, we need to be fully committed to provide the necessary tools and assistance to landowners to achieve these essential public goals. This investment, along with appropriate conservation incentives, will allow landowners to implement conservation strategies and make the necessary changes to the landscape to accomplish these vital goals.

The bottom line is that producers need quality technical assistance to maximize the effectiveness of the financial assistance they receive. Even without financial help, many producers still rely on technical help to ensure that they are putting quality practices on the land. It is the combination of the two that makes America's conservation delivery system effective and efficient.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the conservation districts from around the country.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Robinson follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF STEVE ROBINSON, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Good morning. I am Steve Robinson, a producer and President of the National Association of Conservation Districts. I own and operate a 900 acre corn, soybean and wheat family farm in Marysville, Ohio, and have served as a district supervisor for the Union County Soil and Water Conservation District since 1988. I also manage Robinson Excavating, Inc., a family-owned excavation business specializing in ponds, waterways, rock chutes and wetlands. I am pleased to be here today on behalf of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) to discuss conservation program administration and delivery.

Across the United States, nearly 3,000 conservation districts are helping local people conserve land, water, forests, wildlife and related natural resources. We share a single mission: to coordinate assistance from all available sources—public and private, local, state and Federal—in an effort to develop locally-driven solutions to natural resource concerns. More than 17,000 officials serve in elected or appointed positions on conservation districts' governing boards. Working directly with more than 2.3 million cooperating land managers and local communities nationwide, our efforts touch more than 1.6 billion acres of private land. We support voluntary, incentive-based programs that provide a range of options, providing both financial and technical assistance to guide landowners in the adoption of conservation practices, improving soil, air and water quality, providing habitat and enhanced land.

Established under state law, conservation districts are local units of state government charged with carrying out programs to protect and manage natural resources

at the local level. To assist in Federal conservation programs implementation, our members work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA), as well as other Federal agencies and state and county programs.

Among other things, conservation districts help:

- implement farm conservation practices to keep soil and nutrients in the fields;
- conserve and restore wetlands, which purify water and provide habitat for birds, fish and numerous other animals;
- protect groundwater resources;
- plant trees and other land cover to hold soil in place, clean the air, provide cover for wildlife and beautify neighborhoods;
- assist local communities with stormwater management, reducing runoff and keeping sediment out of streams and lakes;
- help developers and homeowners manage their land in an environmentally-sensitive manner; and
- reach out to communities and schools to teach the value of natural resources and encourage conservation efforts.

As a producer, I have had the opportunity to utilize farm bill programs and assistance. Conservation practices on my farm include nine water and sediment control structures, three waterways with rock chutes, surface drainage, a wooded wetland, filter strips and use of no-tillage and strip tillage on corn. In addition to these conservation practices, I have 200 acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).

For many of the conservation activities on my land, such as the multiple Water and Sediment Control Basins I installed throughout my farm, I have not received any financial assistance. However, the technical assistance provided by NRCS has provided me with the necessary information and tools to install these important conservation measures based on good science.

As an excavator, I have seen first-hand how technical assistance helps farmers install conservation practices that reduce soil erosion and improve water quality. My work gives me the opportunity to see the results of technical assistance from the conservation plan to the completed on-the-ground project.

In many ways, farm bill conservation programs and policies help keep me on the farm. While I get some support from commodity programs, the conservation tools—both technical and financial—have helped me and other producers avoid regulation and allowed me to continue farming in an ever-changing environment.

Technical assistance is the backbone of Federal conservation programs, enabling local NRCS field staff and districts to work with landowners and state and local agencies to address local resource concerns. Technical assistance is utilized to work with landowners on all elements of conservation plans, from design and layout to implementation. It is designed to help landowners understand the need for and benefits of conservation practices and to outline necessary steps or actions for farm bill conservation program participation. Technical assistance is also utilized for conservation practice evaluation and maintenance. Once a conservation system is established, it must be maintained to ensure continued benefits.

Funding for technical assistance allows NRCS, conservation district employees and technical service providers (TSPs) to meet face-to-face with landowners on their operations, and help them design strategies to address specific resource needs. Through these discussions, a comprehensive conservation plan can be developed and financial assistance programs such as EQIP or other programs can be utilized to help meet the goals of the conservation plans. We are pleased to see a new emphasis by NRCS to streamline procedures, use newer technologies, and encourage more technical assistance delivered on the farm or ranch.

NACD's top priority is to encourage landowners to adopt conservation practices that provide countless public benefits of clean air, clean water, healthy soils and wildlife habitat. We are pleased with the overall commitment provided for conservation programs in the 2008 Farm Bill.

Technical assistance delivery is the most critical element to conservation program participation and conservation practice adoption. However, as I talk with district officials across the country, the consistent message is that there is not enough technical assistance funding to meet landowners' needs and demands.

For example, Maryland Soil Conservation Districts have identified a shortfall of 96 staff needed to meet the increased workload resulting from the Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL). These positions are critical to the adoption and

implementation of conservation efforts that will help achieve improved water quality in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Across the country, landowners are seeking information on how to best manage their land. Demand continues to increase for additional technical assistance to help interested landowners develop appropriate conservation plans and practices regardless of the size of the tract of land, land use type, or use of financial assistance. Many landowners are ineligible for conservation programs, while others find the application process complicated, time consuming, and sometimes prohibitive to participation. It is important to reach all lands in a watershed to achieve local and national goals for the area.

Insufficient technical assistance is the main barrier to conservation practice adoption. While we recognize there has been an increased investment in conservation programs, this has come without a correlating increase in staff needed to deliver additional assistance. More technical dollars are needed as program funding increases. Increasing technical assistance is necessary to realize the full return on our conservation investment.

In addition to more boots on the ground, paperwork burdens continue to be a concern. Improved efficiencies and asset allocation need to be achieved to allow technical personnel more time in the field. Streamlining applications, reducing paperwork requirements and increasing computer program compatibility could ease the burdens on field office staff while also benefiting producers during the application process.

We support NRCS Chief White's conservation delivery streamlining initiative to reduce duplication of data entry, simplify conservation delivery, and streamline business processes to achieve greater efficiency and allow field staff to spend more time in the field with customers delivering conservation assistance.

The bottom line is that we support full funding for NRCS to deliver farm bill conservation programs and meet the growing demand and need for technical assistance in concert with conservation districts, TSPs and other partners. In this rather complex environment, we should examine all potential improvements to effective, efficient conservation technical assistance delivery. We would like to see a full accounting of staffing and technology needs required to fully implement farm bill conservation provisions and accomplish our national and local conservation goals. We seek the most direct and efficient structure for conservation program delivery and for that reason we support the current structure of consolidated conservation delivery within NRCS. We will measure all ideas by these standards.

NACD has formed a farm bill task force to in part examine technical assistance requirements and we will look closely at the question of how to improve technical assistance delivery to farmers and ranchers. As you begin the work of writing the 2012 Farm Bill, we hope to work closely with the Committee to address this issue and ensure that there is an appropriate funding mechanism for technical assistance delivery.

Conservation districts are uniquely positioned to work with NRCS, TSPs and others to expand technical assistance capacity. As we broaden and strengthen the traditional conservation partnership, these local advocates are already leveraging Federal funding to accelerate conservation application on the ground.

Conservation districts have technical staff capable of providing quality technical assistance and are well-equipped to receive and utilize any new Federal funds for technical assistance to assist local producers and program participants to put conservation practices on the landscape.

Another growing issue as land continues to be fragmented and urban and suburban areas continue to encroach on rural lands is that of small acreage landowners. There is little to no technical assistance available for this quickly growing group. Small acreage landowners frequently are not eligible for Federal assistance programs, or rank low due to the scale of their operation. As consumers seek more locally-grown foods, it is imperative that these small acreage farmers receive conservation technical assistance to meet their natural resource concerns. Conservation districts have identified small acreage resource issues through their locally led conservation efforts, but assistance remains limited.

With the growing threat of regulations, such as EPA's new pesticide permitting requirements under the Clean Water Act and the establishment of TMDLs in the Chesapeake Bay and other watersheds, private landowners will have an even tougher time navigating an already difficult maze of permits, regulations and bureaucracy. Landowners will be left with the enforcement and the financial burden of compliance without guidance or technology to do so.

Technical assistance is an essential ingredient to help these landowners navigate through the complex maze of Federal bureaucracy. Because they are known and trusted by local farmers and ranchers, conservation districts are frequently the liai-

son between the landowner and Federal and state agencies. Districts and NRCS professionals can help these producers implement best management practices and mitigate regulatory burdens.

The public expects clean air, clean water, healthy soils and abundant wildlife habitat. As a nation we need to be fully committed to providing the necessary tools and assistance to landowners to achieve these essential public goals. This investment—along with appropriate conservation incentives—will allow landowners to implement conservation strategies and make the necessary changes to the landscape to accomplish these vital goals.

The technical assistance provided by NRCS field staff, along with the resources provided by conservation districts and state conservation agencies, is critical to the success of conservation in the United States. The bottom line is that producers need quality technical assistance to maximize the effectiveness of the financial assistance they receive. Even without financial help, many producers still rely on technical help to ensure that they are putting quality practices on the land. It is the combination of the two that makes America's conservation delivery system efficient and effective.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of conservation districts across the country.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Robinson.

Mr. Lohr, before you begin, what county in Pennsylvania is Norvelt located in?

Mr. LOHR. That is Westmoreland County.

The CHAIRMAN. Westmoreland County, okay. Okay, sir.

STATEMENT OF JOHN R. LOHR, VICE PRESIDENT, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FARM SERVICE AGENCY COUNTY OFFICE EMPLOYEES, NORVELT, PA

Mr. LOHR. Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is John Lohr, and I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your Committee today.

I have worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency and its predecessor, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, for my entire adult life, beginning as a part-time ASCS field assistant after high school. Since 1978, I have been the FSA County Executive Director at the Greensburg, Pennsylvania, service center.

I am here today representing NASCOE, the National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees. Also, our national President, Myron Stroup of Kansas, is here, sitting behind me. NASCOE is the organization that represents all county-level employees of the Farm Service Agency, and we are here today because we believe that USDA can administer and deliver conservation programs in a more efficient and effective manner.

Before the USDA reorganization in the mid-1990s, FSA's predecessor, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, administered all USDA conservation programs. In fact, the root of the county committee system is centered on the administration of conservation programs created by the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938. Today, FSA staff and county committees are still responsible for the largest USDA conservation initiative, the Conservation Reserve Program.

This morning, I will explain a few of the reasons why having FSA administer conservation programs makes sense for producers and ranchers, as well as the American taxpayer.

With regard to program eligibility, both FSA and NRCS use the same forms. It is redundant to have both agencies gathering eligi-

bility information. As for processing the application, FSA maintains all records pertaining to the farm or ranch. At present, either the producer or an NRCS employee makes numerous visits or inquiries to the FSA office to gather the data to complete a conservation application.

FSA also has extensive experience issuing payments and has the software and training to make the payments in a timely manner. The availability of all producer and farm eligibility records in one location allows for faster and easier resolutions when payment problems occur.

Since it is necessary for the NRCS staff to make frequent farm or ranch visits, their offices are unattended on many occasions. Each business day, every FSA office is continuously staffed to service all program applicants. Allowing the FSA to administer conservation programs would eliminate producer frustration when they make trips or initiate phone calls to NRCS only to find no staff in that office.

Additionally, the success of the current Conservation Reserve Program demonstrates that NRCS and FSA can work together, with FSA handling program administration and with NRCS responsible for the technical aspects of the program.

Our proposal allows USDA to do more work without additional resources. If FSA is responsible for conservation administration, NRCS staff will have more time to spend with farmers and ranchers, educating them about conservation programs and ensuring the programs work as Congress intended.

Under the NASCOE proposal today, all phases of conservation programs defined as *administrative*, like applications, contract maintenance, and payments, would be the responsibility of FSA. NRCS would be responsible for all phases of conservation programs defined as *technical*, like conservation plan development, on-site determinations, and contract compliance.

These assignments would allow each agency to utilize their abilities and resources in the most effective and productive manner. FSA has consistently been able to deliver programs with a low average administrative cost. FSA would bring the same level of delivery cost and efficiency to conservation program administration.

Both FSA and NRCS are upgrading their technology and business processes, FSA through the Modernize and Innovate the Delivery of Agricultural Systems project, the MIDAS project, and NRCS through the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative. Having FSA administer conservation programs would go a long way toward assisting NRCS in reaching these two streamlining goals: reducing field staff administrative workloads by 80 percent and enabling their field staff to spend 75 percent of their time in the field providing assistance to farmers and ranchers. With these two technology and business upgrades under way, now is the time to make IT changes to enhance FSA's administrative and NRCS's technical capabilities.

In summary, NASCOE supports FSA being responsible for all conservation program administration. We believe that allowing NRCS personnel more time for producer technical assistance and program education will ensure that Federal conservation programs

will be more cost-effective and provide a better USDA service to our farmers and ranchers.

Thank you very much for allowing me to testify today.
[The prepared statement of Mr. Lohr follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOHN R. LOHR, VICE PRESIDENT, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF FARM SERVICE AGENCY COUNTY OFFICE EMPLOYEES, NORVELT, PA

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is John Lohr, and I appreciate the opportunity to testify before your Committee today.

I was born and raised on our family's dairy farm in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. I have worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency and its predecessor the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) for my entire adult life, beginning as a part-time ASCS field assistant after high school in 1968. Since 1978, I have been the Farm Service Agency County Executive Director in my home county and today also cover Fayette County from a consolidated office in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. I am here today representing the National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees (NASCOE). I am pleased that our national President, Mr. Myron Stroup of Kansas, is also here today.

The National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees (NASCOE) is an organization that represents the county level employees of the Farm Service Agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). NASCOE was originally chartered in 1959. FSA employees are in contact with virtually every producer in the United States, and NASCOE is proud to represent all county office employees, 85% of whom are association members.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, we are here today because we believe that the USDA can administer and deliver conservation programs in a more effective and efficient manner. With today's Federal budget situation, Federal employees will continue to be required to do more with less for the near future. Natural Resource and Conservation Service employees in the field serve American agriculture well, but what has become increasingly evident to Farm Service Agency (FSA) county office employees is that there are many workload duplications by FSA and NRCS field staff. NASCOE members at the field office level regularly relate to us that NRCS employees indicate they prefer to work at what they do best, the technical field work, and that FSA is better equipped and ready to handle conservation program administration.

Please recall that before the USDA reorganization in the mid 1990's, FSA's predecessor, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), administered all USDA's conservation programs. In fact, the root of the county committee system is centered on the administration of conservation programs created by the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938. Today FSA staff and locally elected county committees are still responsible for the largest USDA conservation initiatives, the Conservation Reserve Program and the Emergency Conservation Program.

This morning I will explain just a few of the reasons why having FSA administer conservation programs makes sense for producers and ranchers as well as the American taxpayer.

With regard to program eligibility, both FSA and NRCS use the same forms. It is redundant to have both agencies gather the eligibility information. FSA is required to load all the data and maintain the forms. FSA already keeps farm and producer eligibility records for both agencies. FSA field office personnel have experience and training in completing eligibility forms so it is more cost-effective for FSA to be the office to initiate the application and determine eligibility. In addition, it is much more efficient to have eligibility completed prior to the applicant's discussion with NRCS on the technical practice determinations.

As for processing the application, FSA maintains all records pertaining to the farm or ranch. FSA county office staff creates and updates farm records, the Common Land Unit, acreage reports, *etc.* If FSA has the responsibility for conservation administration, producers would visit the FSA office to initiate the conservation program application and have access to their farm's data. At present, either the producer or an NRCS employee makes numerous visits and inquiries to the FSA county office to gather and/or update the data to complete the application. Allowing the FSA office to handle the application process would save time and eliminate confusion for both the producer and the office staff.

FSA has extensive experience issuing payments and has the software training to make the payments in a timely manner. The availability of all eligibility, producer

and farm records in one location allows for faster and easier resolutions when payment issuance problems arise.

Since it is necessary for the NRCS staff to make frequent farm or ranch visits, their office is unattended on many occasions. Each business day, every FSA office is continuously staffed to serve program applicants. Allowing the FSA to administer conservation programs would eliminate frustration when producers make trips or initiate phone calls to the NRCS office only to find no one available to assist them.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) currently allows the FSA office to take the application, determine payment eligibility, generate and approve the contract, and make cost share and annual rental payments with NRCS making technical determinations. The success of the CRP demonstrates that NRCS and FSA can work well together with FSA handling the program administration and with NRCS responsible for the technical aspects of programs.

Our proposal, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, allows USDA to do more work without additional resources. If FSA is responsible for conservation administration, NRCS staff will have more time to spend with farmers and ranchers educating them about conservation programs and assuring the programs work as Congress intended.

Under the NASCOE proposal today, all phases of conservation programs defined as administrative, applications, contract maintenance, payments, *etc.*, would be the responsibility of FSA. NRCS would be responsible for all phases of conservation programs defined as technical, *i.e.*, conservation plan development, on-site determinations and contract compliance.

These assignments allow each agency to utilize their abilities and resources in the most efficient and productive manner. FSA has consistently been able to deliver farm programs with a low average administrative cost. FSA would bring this same level of delivery cost and efficiency to conservation program administration.

Both FSA and NRCS are in the process of upgrading their technology and business processes, FSA through the Modernize and Innovate the Delivery of Agricultural Systems (MIDAS) project and NRCS through the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative. Having FSA administer conservation programs would go a long way towards assisting NRCS in reaching its Streamlining Initiative goals of reducing field staff administrative workloads by 80%. It would also enable their field staff to reach the goal of spending 75% of their time in the field providing conservation assistance to farmers and ranchers. NRCS has indicated concern with the administrative burden on field office technical staff from expanded roles for contract development and management. NRCS's Streamlining Initiative encourages a move to a "natural resource centric view" concentrating on identifying and solving resource problems and moving away from a "financial assistance centric view."

The NRCS Streamlining Initiative highlighted as one of its top objectives the implementation of programs through alternative staffing and delivery approaches designed around more efficient business processes to minimize the non-technical workload on field staff.

Now is the time to make the IT changes to enhance FSA's administrative and NRCS's technical capabilities. For example, FSA and NRCS use different GIS software programs, ArcGIS and Toolkit, respectively. This is not practical. It is extremely inefficient to develop and maintain two USDA systems to administer farm and conservation programs. We can no longer afford these inefficiencies.

In summary, NASCOE supports FSA being responsible for all conservation program administration. We believe that allowing NRCS field personnel more time for producer technical assistance and program education will assure that Federal agricultural programs will be more cost efficient and provide a better USDA service to our farmers and ranchers. Finally, with our current budget situation, allowing FSA to administer these programs assures the American taxpayer that USDA is being the best steward possible with the funds we have been entrusted.

Thank you for allowing me to present testimony today.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Mr. Lohr.
Mr. Leathers?

**STATEMENT OF RON LEATHERS, PUBLIC FINANCE DIRECTOR,
PHEASANTS FOREVER, INC.; GOVERNMENT GRANTS
COORDINATOR, QUAIL FOREVER, ST. PAUL, MN**

Mr. LEATHERS. Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to come here and talk to you today. My name is Ron Leathers. I am the Public Finance Director for

Pheasants Forever, and I am here representing the 700 chapters and the 119,000 members of Pheasants and Quail Forever.

We are here to talk about our Farm Bill Biologist Program. The Farm Bill Biologist Program is a unique partnership between the state fish and wildlife agencies, Pheasants Forever, and USDA that uses the third-party technical assistance provisions of the farm bill. And I would like to thank the Committee for that opportunity to work jointly to deliver technical assistance on the landscape.

Pheasants Forever's program is incredibly efficient and effective. Using the power of partnerships, we are able to deliver conservation to landowners as efficiently and effectively as any program we have seen. Our State Fish and Wildlife agencies and Pheasants Forever are passionate about this opportunity. To deliver habitat is our mission and the state fish and wildlife agencies' mission. In fact, we are so efficient we are able to deliver \$3 to \$5 non-Federal dollars for every Federal dollar that is invested into this program.

Our program started in 2003 in Representative Herseth Sandlin's State of South Dakota with four farm bill biologists. I was one of those farm bill biologists in 2003. At that time, the program was funded solely by South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks and Pheasants Forever. In 2004, we were able to bring in a contribution agreement with NRCS to help fund additional bodies, and, in 2004, we expanded the program into Nebraska. Since that time, we have added 62 biologists in 11 states.

New opportunities present themselves each week, and we look to take advantage of those opportunities. Mr. Chairman, as we spoke about earlier, we are looking to put some positions in Pennsylvania to help sell the Pennsylvania CREPs. And we were encouraged to hear that the amendments to the CREP program are moving forward.

Our farm bill biologists work as an integrated component of the USDA field offices, specifically the NRCS field office, but they work with FSA staff, as well, to implement the CRP and the various programs FSA delivers.

We are addressing landowner needs by holding landowner workshops to encourage landowner participation in programs, both generally, talking to the landowners that walk through the door, and in targeted specific landscape resource needs. Farm bill biologists have conducted landowner forums to help landowners understand the specific programs, and this will be a critical step as we move forward with the next general CRP sign-up. All of our farm biologists will hold these landowner forums to help landowners understand the program, to help landowners understand the EBI, and to help landowners deliver a competitive bid.

Administratively, the process has been relatively straightforward, and I would like to thank the Committee and NRCS for putting this into place. Our administrative team tracks expenses, invoices the partners, and puts the positions in place. This relative straightforwardness has helped to keep our administrative costs low, and, again, we appreciate that for our partners.

Before I wrap up, Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask for the Committee's assistance in continuing to provide CTA fund availability. Conservation technical assistance funds are what fund the contribution agreements that keep our bodies in the field offices work-

ing with the landowners. We have willing non-Federal partners in several states, but limited CTA funds are limiting our program's ability to grow.

Again, our partnership efforts result in incredible cost-effectiveness, providing conservation technical assistance to our landowners. Our joint biologists are doing some outstanding conservation work, but the availability of CTA funds is limiting our capacity to expand the program.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to address the Committee and for your leadership in this area. I would be happy to address any questions the Committee has.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Leathers follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RON LEATHERS, PUBLIC FINANCE DIRECTOR,, PHEASANTS FOREVER, INC.; GOVERNMENT GRANTS COORDINATOR, QUAIL FOREVER, ST. PAUL, MN

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, my name is Ron Leathers. I am the Public Finance Director for Pheasants Forever and I reside in Blaine, MN. I am a professional wildlife biologist with expertise in wildlife and Farm Bill Conservation Program delivery. My primary responsibilities as Pheasants Forever's Public Finance Director are to oversee administration of funding partnerships with public entities and to develop organizational capacity for new partnership development.

I am here today representing the 700 nationwide chapters of Pheasants and Quail Forever. These chapters complete on average more than 25,000 individual projects annually with conservation minded farmers and ranchers on 500,000 acres. The vast majority of these projects is completed on private lands and involves grassland establishment and management. Projects involve the establishment of nesting, brood rearing, and winter cover for pheasants, quail, and a wide array of wildlife.

Collectively, our members and supporters represent a sizable cross-section of our nations' citizenry, and we appreciate the increased role and importance of conservation in agriculture and its role in private land stewardship that has led to consensus and partnerships among government and private interests, including farm and commodity groups, individual farmers and ranchers, and hunters and anglers.

It is our view that the conservation titles of recent farm bills represent the most comprehensive array of conservation programs ever enacted in conjunctions with Federal farm legislation and we recognize and appreciate the strong support from you Mr. Chairman and your Subcommittee in providing this authorization. I'd like to offer a few thoughts about Pheasants Forever's efforts to implement the conservation programs of the farm bill and to share some of the individual program success stories that we have benefited from.

Program Background

Pheasants Forever's Farm Bill Biologist program began in 2003 with the placement of four wildlife biologists in Natural Resources Conservation Service county service centers throughout eastern South Dakota. At that time, the program was funded solely by South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks. In 2004, South Dakota NRCS was able to direct funding toward the partnership using the conservation technical assistance provisions of the 2002 Farm Bill, resulting in the hiring of two additional Farm Bill Biologists.

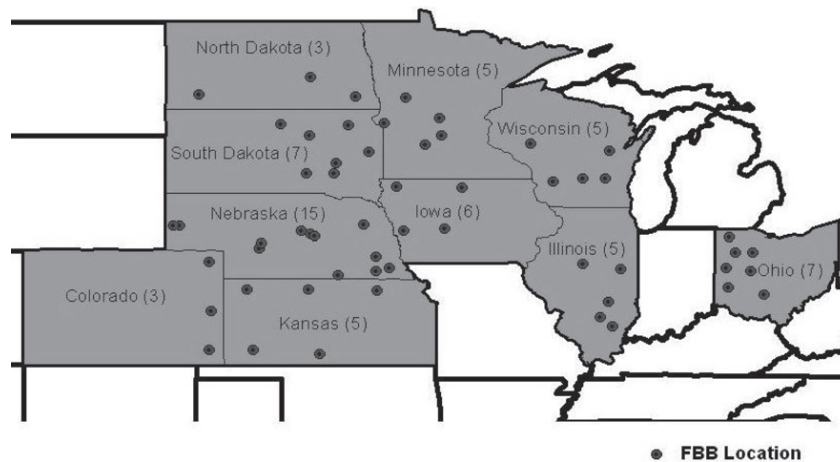
From its beginnings as a four employee, three-party partnership in South Dakota, the Farm Bill Biologist program has grown to its current level of 62 biologists in 11 states funded by 42 separate entities (see map below). Much of this growth has occurred in the past 2 years as PF began to recognize the overall value of this partnership to the organization's mission delivery and began to direct additional resources toward capacity and program infrastructure development. New partnership opportunities emerge weekly, and Pheasants Forever anticipates growth to continue at the current pace for the next 2-3 years.

Farm Bill Biologist Program Summary By State

State	Year Implemented	Number of Biologists	Total Producer/Landowner Contacts	Acres
South Dakota	2003	7	9,659	458,021
Nebraska	2004	15	7,486	641,226

Farm Bill Biologist Program Summary By State—Continued

State	Year Implemented	Number of Biologists	Total Producer/Landowner Contacts	Acres
Minnesota	2004	5	4,802	21,407
Ohio	2005	7	6,959	102,473
Missouri	2005	—	348	29,360
Wisconsin	2007	5	2,470	13,045
North Dakota	2008	3	847	43,186
Iowa	2009	5	170	3,752
Illinois	2010	5		
Kansas	2010 (April)	5		
Colorado	2010 (May)	3		
Idaho	2010 (July)	2		
Total		62	32,741	1,312,470



Mr. Chairman, below are some specific state-by-state examples of our Farm Bill Biologist program's success. I've provided a more comprehensive summary of our Nebraska program since it is one of the more developed programs to date.

Nebraska Farm Bill Wildlife Biologist Program Summary

The Nebraska Farm Bill Biologist partnership began in October 2004 and has had a significant impact on Nebraska's natural resources since that time. The partnership is implemented with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission and Pheasants Forever, Inc. This partnership was formed with six Farm Bill Wildlife Biologists working with private landowners across the state to deliver conservation programs. Since 2004, the program has expanded to include nine biologists and is anticipated to grow by an additional five biologists by the end of 2010.

From October 2004 to September 2009, the partnership impacted over 290,123 acres. A key to the success of the partnership is the ability of the biologist to not only work with landowners to encourage enrollment in conservation programs, but to also guide landowners through every step in the contract enrollment, approval and completion process. In the partnership history, biologists have allocated their time spent delivering USDA conservation programs in the following breakdown:

- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) = 42.3%.
- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) = 24.1%.
- Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) = 16.9%.
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) = 9.5%.
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) = 6.6%.
- Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) = 0.6%.

The Farm Bill Biologist partnership may best be described as a ‘one-stop shopping’ location for landowners to both learn about and enroll in conservation programs. The success of this partnership is indicated by many numbers and results, but perhaps the best indicator of success is the fact that landowners in the state typically have about a 2 month waiting period to be able to meet with a biologist. Another example of the partnerships’ success is that its biologists are primarily responsible for the great successes experienced in fully allocating all the available Continuous CRP acres in the state for CP33 and CP38. In fact, both programs have a substantial waiting list of landowners waiting for additional acres to be allocated to the state.

In addition to these traditional activities, the Nebraska partnership biologists conduct many other activities that promote USDA conservation programs and their delivery. Some of those additional activities include:

- Conducting 12 to 15 ‘Landowner Habitat Tours’ across the state each year. These tours to local sites allow landowners to see firsthand the results and benefits of USDA conservation programs on their neighbors lands.
- Conducting eight to 12 landowner ‘Prescribed Burn Workshops’ across the state each year. These workshops help landowners understand the value of prescribed burning and how to conduct a safe and effective prescribed burn using USDA conservation programs as a resource.
- Formed six local ‘Prescribed Burn Associations’ across the state. A local prescribed burn association can best be described as ‘neighbors helping neighbors’ conduct burns in a method that provides training, manpower and equipment.
- Conducting ten to 15 ‘Landowner Conservation Program Information Meetings’ across the state each year. These forums offer landowners the opportunities to learn how USDA conservation programs can work in their farming and ranching operation. These forums will become increasingly important and increase in frequency when a general CRP sign-up is announced.

Minnesota Farm Bill Biologist Program

In Minnesota, five FBB’s are funded through state and local dollars. 70% state funding is leverage by 30% from a combination of local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Pheasants Forever chapters, and other private groups including Lake Associations, Watershed Districts, and local Sportsmen’s groups. The majority of work is performed on the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP), Wetlands Reserve Program, and MN’s Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) program. The lack of Federal funding is a limitation to further expansion of the MN program.

Wisconsin Farm Bill Biologist Program

In Wisconsin, FBB’s work in cooperation with the NRCS, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, FSA, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Priority programs in WI include the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) as well as the Emergency Watershed Protection Program-Floodplain Easement (EWPP-FPE). Both of these programs are permanent conservation easements designed to restore and protect drained and degraded wetland habitats. In 2010, WRP funding supported 27 projects on 2,778 acres. Of the \$9.5 million allocated to WI, \$3 million was an additional request by the state due to strong landowner interest and backlog of applications.

Ohio Farm Bill Biologist Program

In Ohio, FBB’s assisted with the 2nd CRP—State Acres For wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) proposal, and have assisted with statewide USDA trainings/workshops. Staff assisted in changing statewide standards and specifications for CRP seed mixes to increase wildlife and pollinator diversity.

South Dakota Farm Bill Biologist Program

Since 2003, South Dakota partners have increased the number of positions from four to seven located throughout eastern South Dakota. The Farm Bill Biologist in Moody County signed up the nation’s first CRP State Acres For wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) contract and Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists played a critical role in program promotion and sign-up for the SAFE program, enabling the state to fully expend its original allocation of SAFE acres within the first 2 weeks of the sign-up.

Illinois, Kansas, Colorado, and Idaho FBB Programs

In each of these states FBB programs have been implemented in 2010. Staff will be working on FSA’s Conservation Reserve Program and the entire suite of NRCS conservation programs. State wildlife agencies are valuable partners in many of the

partnerships. It is expected that FBB's in these states will provide assistance to landowners participating in the upcoming CRP general sign-up. Conducting landowner forums to provide information on how to submit competitive bids for CRP will be a priority in all states FBB programs.

Program Administration

Program implementation involves distinct management and administrative functions. Pheasants Forever's program implementation team includes a coordinator with responsibilities for partner coordination and new partner development, a manager with supervisory and mentoring responsibilities, and an administrative team with responsibility for project accounting, reporting, and HR.

Farm Bill Biologist Program administration is provided by Pheasants Forever's Grant Department. The department is responsible for all centralized financial and accounting functions. Grant administrators track program payroll and monthly expenses, distribute expenses among various funding agreements, invoice partners, submit progress and financial reports, and conduct regular budgeting and cash flow analyses.

Administrative Areas of Concern

Administratively, implementation of the NRCS Contribution Agreements is a relatively straight-forward process. Pheasants Forever appreciates the efforts of the Committee and NRCS to address concerns we have raised previously related to year-to-year program stability. We offer the following areas of concern and ask the Committee and NRCS's assistance in addressing them.

1. Increased Funding for Conservation Technical Assistance

NRCS funding for Pheasants Forever's Farm Bill Biologist program typically comes from either direct program technical assistance funds, or general conservation technical assistance funding. Both sources are important to meeting the needs and desires of the nation's agricultural producers.

Conservation technical assistance funding in contribution agreements provides the Farm Bill Biologist the opportunity to holistically evaluate the resource needs and landowner desires for the property—independent of program availability. This initial habitat planning process helps to ensure that the biologist is addressing all resource needs instead of focusing on those needs that can be efficiently addressed by a single program.

Increased technical assistance funding provides not only the opportunity to address the full suite of resource needs for a specific property, but also helps to provide the best value for the taxpayer. Pheasants Forever's Farm Bill Biologist Program provides \$3 to \$5 in non-Federal funding for every \$1 in Federal investment.

2. Cash-flow

At current staffing levels, the budget for Pheasants Forever's Farm Bill Biologist program exceeds \$3,500,000 annually. Although the grant department is extremely efficient at invoicing partners—invoices go out within 15 days of receiving monthly expense reports—Pheasants Forever carries in excess of \$100,000 in federally reimbursable expenses associated with the program at any given time.

Cash flow has become a primary factor limiting program growth. Without advance funding from partners, the organization is unable to outlay the necessary cash to meet payroll and monthly expense needs of the program. For all new partnerships, Pheasants Forever requires sufficient advances from partners to ensure neutral cash flow. Two potential options that could be explored to address the cash-flow concern for Federal funds include:

- **Provide a cash advance option in Contribution Agreements.**
Allowing cash advances equal to the estimated expense for a 60 day window would ensure neutral cash flow, reducing the burden on partners and allowing continued program expansion.
- **Provide for pre-contracted hourly rates in Contribution Agreements.** Providing an option for pre-contracted billable rates in Contribution Agreements would help expedite the invoice process and reduce the Federal portion of out of pocket expense incurred by Pheasants Forever.

3. Allowability of administrative expenses

Pheasants Forever's annual direct program implementation expenses exceed \$300,000. All implementation expense burden to date has been born by non-Federal partners—much of this from the state fish and wildlife

agencies and Pheasants Forever chapters who have supported not only the administrative expense associated with their portion of the agreement, but the administrative expense associated with the Federal share as well. Allowability of administrative expenses in NRCS contribution agreements has not been sufficiently clarified and in the absence of clarity, has been denied. However it is critical to the program's stability that administrative expenses associated with the Federal share of the program are born by the Federal agreement.

As Pheasants Forever pushes toward a decade of partnership on the Farm Bill Biologist Program we ask that the Committee and NRCS continue to pursue flexible opportunities to work with Pheasants Forever and all your non-Federal partners to maximize "on the ground" benefits of Farm Bill conservation programs in this cost-effective manner.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to take this opportunity to address two additional related and important issues. First, the final rules for the Conservation Reserve Programs have not yet been published. These rules are important to the overall implementation of the program and a necessity prior to the upcoming general sign-up. Final rules will implement many important changes from the 2008 Farm Bill including the updating of cropping history requirements for CRP eligibility. It is imperative that rules are published soon and that information concerning eligibility and the Environmental Benefits Index be made available in order to ensure an open and successful general sign-up. Secondly, we are still awaiting implementation of the "Open Fields" or voluntary public access provisions of the farm bill. In this case \$50 million in funding is available for 2010-2012 and we are losing valuable time as we wait for rules to be published. Any assistance the Committee can provide in these areas would be much appreciated.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.
Dr. Manley?

**STATEMENT OF SCOTT W. MANLEY, Ph.D., DIRECTOR OF
CONSERVATION PROGRAMS, DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC.,
RIDGELAND, MS**

Dr. MANLEY. Thank you all very much for having Ducks Unlimited at the table here today to talk about the conservation title of the farm bill. Just having a seat at this table is definitely very important to us, and we appreciate it very much.

Ducks Unlimited thinks that the farm bill is really the most important piece of legislation in giving us a safe and abundant food supply in this country, for sustainable landscapes, and for agriculture and natural resources. It is one very important piece of legislation, to say the least.

Ducks Unlimited is a not-for-profit wetlands and waterfowl conservation group. We span Canada, the U.S., and Mexico. We have over a million supporters across these three countries. I am one of a team of directors for Ducks Unlimited whose responsibility is to get our conservation programs delivered on the ground.

I live in the South Jackson, Mississippi, and I primarily oversee those 15 states of the Southeast, so there may be a little southern flair to my comments here this morning.

The most important thing really is that Ducks Unlimited thinks the current farm bill is actually very solid and successful, and we have talked about a lot of the challenges here today. I want to talk about some of the great things about this farm bill that we have today.

I think it has a great balance between what we call working lands conservation and restoration of natural communities. It is just as much about working with the ag producers and livestock

ranchers as it is about putting wetlands and grasslands back on the landscape.

One of the great examples of a working lands program, of course, is EQIP. Ducks Unlimited is involved in water conservation practices with EQIP and rice farmers down in Texas and other parts of the country. And then another example is Ducks Unlimited's involvement in delivering the Wetland Reserve Program, which we did in a very large way leading up to the 2008 Farm Bill.

Again, the great thing about the farm bill today is it is a great balance between what we call, *Farm the Best—Restore the Rest*. It is very positive.

The landscape initiatives that Chief White mentioned earlier, Ducks Unlimited also thinks they are extremely important, very effective. The Ag Water Enhancement Program, the Mississippi River Basin Initiative, these landscape initiatives are definitely targeted at resource concerns and landowner needs, and have been very effective as we move forward.

Probably the thing that I think has been the most effective in moving the farm bill and conservation programs forward is really the state and local governance of programs. You know, each state and each locale within a state has different socioeconomic needs, different landscape issues. Every place is unique. And if you allow the states and the locales to mold or shape the rules of these programs to meet their issues and needs, that is much more effective than an umbrella of rules at a national level that just doesn't fit all cases and scenarios. So that state and local governance of programs is extremely important.

Certainly, there are still challenges to the farm bill as we have it today. And we have heard it repeatedly within this group here, we have heard it repeatedly from the floor, that the technical assistance funds are not adequate to move all of the great programs forward. These are technical assistance funds that can be used for both the FSA and the NRCS and for partnerships like Mr. Leathers and I have talked about, partnerships where Ducks Unlimited or Pheasants Forever or other groups help you get your programs delivered. Diversifying this capacity through partnerships and through additional TA funds will be the answer to getting these great programs on the ground in the future.

I would like to give you a quick proof of the power of partnerships. Up to the 2008 Farm Bill, there were 2 million acres of WRP, Wetland Reserve Program, delivered in the whole country. Half of that was delivered in the Southeast states. And in almost every state you had an NGO or you had a state conservation group that was partnering with the NRCS to get that done. That is over half of the WRP acres.

The last thing is the very positive state and local governance of programs is also one of the biggest challenges. So I would like to see as much of the rules, regulations, specifications that go with the delivery of these programs to be left up to the states and locales, because that is where we can make these things work in the future.

So, with that, I would like to close and just thank you for a seat at the table here today. And I will defer over to Dr. Burns. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Manley follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SCOTT W. MANLEY, PH.D., DIRECTOR OF CONSERVATION
PROGRAMS, DUCKS UNLIMITED, INC., RIDGELAND, MS

Ducks Unlimited, Inc. (DU) is pleased to testify before the House Agriculture Committee on the successes of the ongoing Conservation Title of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act 2008 (*i.e.*, Farm Bill). We also appreciate the opportunity to provide general recommendations for improved conservation delivery in the upcoming 2012 Farm Bill. The farm bill is the most important legislation in assuring a safe and abundant food supply for citizens of the United States and for conserving our precious natural resources on which the strength of this country has been built. We commend Congress for its focus on ensuring the long-term strength and viability of this important legislation.

Ducks Unlimited is a nonprofit wetlands and wildlife conservation organization with affiliates in both Canada and Mexico. I am one of a team of Conservation Directors for DU with responsibility of building and delivering on-the-ground programs to improve wildlife, water and soil resources. In particular, I work in our Southern Region, which covers 15 south-central states from Kansas to New Mexico east to the Atlantic Coast. Our region hosts some of the most productive lands in the United States for both agriculture and wildlife, including the Lower Mississippi Valley, Gulf Coastal Prairies, and the Southern Great Plains. It is in these fertile regions of the country that great examples of farm bill successes and challenges are demonstrated.

Highlights of Success:

1. Balance of Working Lands and Restored Natural Lands—The current farm bill has what I believe to be a good balance in programs that conserve wildlife, water, and soil resources on working production lands and programs that restore natural communities such as wetlands, grasslands, and forest. A prime example of a working lands program would include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) while an example of a restoration program would be the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). Together, these programs give landowners choices to address conservation issues in light of what the land needs and in consideration of what works in their agribusiness operations. Simply put, it promotes DU's shared philosophy of "Farm the Best—Restore the Rest."
2. Landscape Initiatives—Other highlights of success from the 2008 Farm Bill are the various landscape initiatives to address targeted resource concerns. Examples include the Agriculture Water Enhancement Program which allows producer and conservation groups to address aquifer depletion concerns throughout the southern region. Another example is the Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI), encompassing the floodplain throughout the Upper and Lower Mississippi Valley, to address soil and nutrient loss leading to the hypoxia issue in the Gulf of Mexico. DU will be working with several partners to deliver an MRBI project in the Illinois River watershed this coming year. This particular project will help restore and enhance critical waterfowl and wildlife habitat while also reducing nutrient runoff that would end up flowing into the Gulf of Mexico.

And as we are aware, given the current human and ecological tragedy involving the Deepwater Horizon spill, the fragile ecosystems of the Gulf Coast will need additional resources to protect and restore these essential marshes, not just for the millions of migratory birds and other wildlife that depend upon them for their survival, but for the people and communities that depend upon them for their own economic survival. DU, working with partners like the NRCS and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, are responding. Working with these partners, DU will focus on restoring and enhancing upwards of 20,000 acres of wetland habitat on lands adjacent to or near Gulf Coast marshes, in particular the Chenier Plain of Southeast Texas and Southwest Louisiana.

These initiatives are invaluable in addressing specific resource concerns that if left unchecked, would be devastating to agricultural and wildlife resources, and also impact citizens across the United States in the future.

3. The level of future interest in WRP enrollment in several regions of the country, particularly the Great Plains and Intermountain West, will hinge on the ability of NRCS to implement a WREP reserved rights program that most importantly is supported by working ranchers. WREP represents an outstanding opportunity to achieve wetland conservation through partnerships between ranchers and the wildlife community. Reserving the grazing rights to the landowner with a reduced easement payment will be critical to protecting and re-

storing areas critical to wetland dependent wildlife. We commend NRCS for its efforts thus far in implementing this and look forward to working with them to make WREP a success.

4. State and Local Governance of Programs—In large part, the various conservation programs in the 2008 Farm Bill are governed and administered at the state and local levels. This is critical to success, as resource needs, sociodemographics, and economics of states and locales differ. These differences can be an asset to programs given one has flexibility in program implementation and administration. Conversely, the differences can render a program ineffective with no flexibility. A good example of success is the current state governance over the appraisal process of easements values in WRP. Each state is given latitude to develop values with various appraisal techniques and offer easement purchases at various prices across a state. This is great progress compared to past practices of individual and complicated appraisals on an easement by easement basis and has in part contributed to the resurgence of this popular conservation program. Another example of success is EQIP, where the various locales within a state are responsible for developing practices that address resource concerns, and applying those practices to conserve natural resources.

Challenges to Address:

1. Capacities to Deliver—There are challenges remaining that if addressed in the 2012 Farm Bill, would set the stage for this country to make unprecedented strides in agricultural conservation. One of the most important challenges is lack of capacity to deliver conservation practices and programs on the land. Overall, the actual conservation programs have ample funding for practices (what we call Financial Assistance), but do not have ample funding to administer and apply the practices on the ground (Technical Assistance). This FA:TA balance is not sufficient to help the people help their land. This is evidenced by backlogs of conservation program applications and unobligated FA funds at the end of the Federal fiscal year. We believe a balance in funding must be restored.

2. Diversifying Capacity to Deliver—Once a balance is restored, one must diversify sources of increased capacity. Certainly adding staff within various USDA offices (*e.g.*, Natural Resources Conservation Service) is needed. But also, bringing various conservation partners into the mix, including DU and others, adds capacity and diversity. Partnerships and partner organizations need the same technical assistance funding as do our various agencies, as at the end of the day even a not-for-profit must break even and be a not-for-loss. These partnership organizations have the knowledge, skills, abilities, experience, positive attitude, and landowner/producer trust to make farm bill programs a success. Providing the avenues and funding to diversify capacity to deliver programs is crucial to helping people help the land.

3. Benefits of Partnerships—The following example demonstrates the need to form conservation partnerships to deliver farm bill programs. Through 2008 just over 2 million acres of wetlands were protected and restored across the United States under WRP. Just over half (1.1 M acres) were within the 15 states of DU's Southern Region. Partnerships, either with Ducks Unlimited or the state conservation agencies (*e.g.*, Missouri), were present in nearly every one of those 15 states. The states with partnerships accounted for a significant portion (1.0 M acres) of accomplishments leading to the 2008 Farm Bill. Capacity and progress afforded by conservation partnerships cannot be underestimated.

4. Administrative Flexibility—Beyond limitations imposed by capacity to deliver, the other main challenge to success is the need for more administrative flexibility within states and locales. The very thing that has led to program success (state and local governance) can still at times be limiting. Examples include state's preclusions on rulings regarding WRP 7 year ownership rule and Conservation Reserve Program county caps blocking enrollments. We believe that to all degrees possible, the states should be able to assess resource needs, sociodemographics, and economics and make decisions to foster success of programs. In the end, we must position ourselves and our programs for conservation success.

On behalf of Ducks Unlimited, I want to thank you all for the opportunity to address the successes of the 2008 Farm Bill and provide general recommendations for improved conservation delivery in the future. We are truly committed to conservation of wildlife, water, and other natural resources, and believe in the motto—"Farm the Best—Restore the Rest." The farm bill is the most important legislation in as-

sureing a safe and abundant food supply for citizens of the United States and for conserving our precious natural resources—especially the land that is the very foundation of both agricultural and wildlife productivity—on which the strength of this country has been built. We commend Congress for its focus on ensuring the long-term strength and viability of this important Act.

The CHAIRMAN. All right. Thank you.
Dr. Burns?

STATEMENT OF ROBERT T. BURNS, Ph.D., P.E., ASSISTANT DEAN, AGRICULTURE, NATURAL RESOURCES AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT & PROFESSOR, UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE EXTENSION, KNOXVILLE, TN

Dr. BURNS. Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the discussion today.

For the past 7 years, I have led a national program that certified technical service providers in the comprehensive nutrient management area. So my comments today will really be focused on opportunities we have to improve the efficiency of program delivery using TSPs.

I would like to start by noting that I think NRCS should be commended for their excellent work with conservation programming. It is of critical importance.

Two points that I would like to bring up today, though, are the need for increased policy consistency by NRCS at the Federal, state, and local levels in regard to TSP programming, and, second, there is a need for increased follow-up of actual plan implementation after the planning stage. And this is especially true with technical service providers.

One of the suggestions that I would make is that NRCS should implement a national certification policy review committee that reviews deviations from the national policy by state NRCS offices. The current farm bill indicates that NRCS should establish a national certification policy in regards to qualifying third-party TSPs. But, in practice—there is such a national policy, but, in reality, it is not enforced at the state NRCS level. Many state NRCS offices have established either different or additional certification criteria that do not follow the national policy.

In the years that I ran the national certification program, we made an effort to track these states that varied and differed and didn't recognize the national certifications. In May of this year, I came up with a list of a dozen such states that deviate from the national policy.

Of even greater concern is the fact that NRCS, at the national level, has not historically tracked or approved any of these deviations that are occurring. So what is going on at the state level is really unknown at the national TSP level. In fact, the national TSP coordinator would call our program and ask us if we knew what was going on in some of these states.

As you can imagine, as a TSP, this is very frustrating because you gain a national certification and then find it is not national in nature. So, specifically, I think NRCS should implement its current national TSP certification policy and effectively ensure that state NRCS offices comply. In addition, this national TSP certification policy review committee I believe that should be established tracks

the state NRCS TSP policy in a timely manner, and either approves or disapproves these deviations.

Second, I would like to suggest that TSP qualification requirements should be streamlined to reduce the time burden required of TSPs to gain and maintain certification.

Because of these inconsistencies in policy, TSPs face different criteria in many different situations. They face an ever-changing set of certification requirements to remain qualified to receive USDA funds for their efforts. In many cases, TSPs are required to meet redundant qualification requirements and training in different states, many times states in the same region, to work within each of those states.

This current lack of NRCS policy oversight at the national level in regards to TSP certification at the state level results in different offices developing different policies for the same programs. It has resulted in many qualified third-party consultants electing to either not serve as TSPs, or electing to stop maintaining their TSP certification as the certification requirements become too burdensome. Again, I think a national review committee to look at this and try to streamline these could be very helpful.

Third, I believe that clear and specific standards for conservation programming and technical assistance should be established to ensure similar-quality deliverables are being provided by NRCS employees and TSPs. Specifically, when working with comprehensive nutrient management planning and preparation across the U.S., it has become very apparent to me that the quality of CNMPs being prepared by both NRCS employees and third-party TSPs vary considerably. While there is a large variation in the quality of the plans being done by both NRCS and TSPs, it is my experience that generally the quality of the CNMPs prepared by TSPs are higher than those that are prepared by NRCS employees.

The current national NRCS CNMP guidance is essentially a listing of components that should be included in the CNMP with no specific guidance on how they should be prepared. So, at the national level, NRCS should establish clear and specific conservation program assistance examples to meet the minimum quality requirements across the nation, so that people can see what that is and we can meet that quality requirement regardless of where we are.

And, finally, to close, I would like to comment about improved follow-up and assistance with conservation planning implementation. Conservation planning is just that; it is planning. To implement those plans, we have to go back with follow-up. NRCS does a good job of that, in my opinion, because they are there on the ground in the counties. The technical service provider system, however, provides no funds for those consultants to do follow-up. And so, many times, without those funds, the follow-up may or may not happen. And it is very necessary, because if the plan is not applied, then we have not made any positive benefit from a conservation standpoint.

Thank you for your time.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Burns follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ROBERT T. BURNS, PH.D., P.E., ASSISTANT DEAN,
AGRICULTURE, NATURAL RESOURCES AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT & PROFESSOR,
UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE EXTENSION SERVICE, KNOXVILLE, TN

Comments on USDA–NRCS Technical Assistance Delivery to U.S. Farmers

Overview of NRCS Conservation Program Technical Assistance Delivery

The conservation program technical assistance provided by USDA–NRCS to U.S. farmers has been and continues to be of critical importance to protecting the United States’ soil, water, air, plant and wildlife resources. In addition, the assistance provided by USDA–NRCS has played a critical role in helping U.S. farming remain economically viable while increasing environmental sustainability. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) should be commended for their excellent work in delivering conservation programming to U.S. farmers both past and present.

For most of its history, the NRCS has primarily depended on NRCS employees (with some assistance from state and county Resource Conservation & Development organizations) to deliver conservation program delivery to farmers. Beginning around 2000, the NRCS implemented a new approach that began the use of third party technical service providers (TSPs) to also provide conservation program delivery to farmers. Under the current program structure, farmers can elect to receive conservation program technical assistance from either Conservation District (county level) NRCS employees or independent TSPs.

The third party TSP program has been operational for a decade now. In many ways it has been successful, but it has also faced many challenges, some of which continue to limit the effectiveness of the program. I have been involved in assisting NRCS with Conservation Program technical assistance delivery for the past decade. Specifically I have worked with NRCS on Comprehensive Nutrient Management Planning (CNMP) delivery. I have led state and national programs that certified third party TSPs for USDA in the CNMP area, as well as provided CNMP training to NRCS employees.

While I commend NRCS on their excellent work regarding CNMP implementation, and other conservation programs, I respectfully offer the following observations and suggestions that I believe could be of assistance in further improving the effectiveness of USDA–NRCS conservation program delivery.

Suggestions for Improved Delivery of Conservation Programming Technical Assistance

Increased Consistency Needed Between NRCS Policy at the National, State and County Levels

The current interpretation and implementation of NRCS conservation program delivery could be improved by reducing NRCS policy inconsistencies at the national, state and county levels. Because of these existing policy inconsistencies, third party TSPs encounter different certification and qualification requirements in different areas, the standards and format of conservation programming deliverables varies by location, and the type and quality of assistance that farmers receive is highly variable by location.

NRCS Should Implement a National Certification Policy Review Committee That Reviews Deviations from the National Policy by State NRCS Offices

The current farm bill indicates that NRCS should establish a national certification policy in regards to qualifying third party TSPs to be eligible to receive USDA funds for providing conservation practice technical assistance. While a national certification policy does exist, in reality it is not enforced at the state NRCS office level. Many state NRCS offices have established either different or additional certification criteria that do not follow the national policy. The result is that TSPs must follow the state NRCS policies if they wish to work in these states. The number of state NRCS office that have developed policies that do not comply with the national policy has increased over the past few years. From 2003 to 2010, I led a TSP CNMP Certification program that was recognized as meeting the national USDA CNMP certification requirements under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with NRCS. As a service to TSPs, my team tracked states where the state NRCS policy was in conflict with the national NRCS policy. Over the past few years, the number of states that do not follow the national NRCS policy has continued to increase. By 2009, a dozen states did not follow the national NRCS CNMP certification policy. Of a greater concern, is the fact that NRCS at the national level does not track or approve the deviations from national policy that are occurring at the state level. In October, 2009 the USDA–NRCS developed new TSP Certification requirements for the CNMP areas that are documented within NRCS’s “General Man-

ual Title 190 Part 405.11". These new requirements replaced the "General Manual Title 180 Part 490.10" requirements. The new NRCS Title 190 Part 405.11 policy states that "in addition to the general requirements, the State Conservationist will establish certification requirements specific to elements of a CNMP." I believe that the wording in the new Title 190 Part 405.11 policy could result in even more state NRCS offices developing policies in conflict with the national NRCS certification policy.

The lack of adherence to the national NRCS policy by at least a dozen state NRCS offices, coupled with a new policy that provide the state NRCS offices more latitude in deviating from the national NRCS CNMP certification policy (without any tracking or approval at the national level) makes it unrealistic for any third party group to offer a workable national TSP certification program for TSPs at this time.

The NRCS should implement its current national TSP certification policy and effectively ensure that state NRCS offices comply. In addition, a national TSP Certification Policy Review Committee should be established that tracks state NRCS TSP policy, and in a timely manner reviews and either approves or disapproves any deviations from the national policy requested by state NRCS offices.

TSP Qualification Requirements Should be Streamlined to Reduce the Time Burden Required of TSPs to Gain and Maintain Certification

Due to the lack of uniformly implemented national TSP certification requirements, and a lack of oversight of state NRCS TSP certification and qualification requirements at the national NRCS level, TSPs currently face an ever changing set of certification requirements to remain qualified to receive USDA funds for their efforts. In many cases, TSPs are required to meet redundant qualification requirements and trainings in different states (many times states within the same region) to work in each state. The current lack of meaningful state NRCS policy oversight by NRCS at the national level in regards to TSP certification results in each state NRCS office developing independent (and many times duplicative) requirements. The current environment is one where state NRCS offices continue to add new requirements such that qualified and certified TSPs must continually spend unrealistic amounts of time and money to maintain the ability to serve as TSPs. This has resulted in many qualified third-party consultants electing to either not serve as TSPs, or electing to stop maintenance of their TSP certification as the certification requirements become too burdensome.

In addition, the current NRCS certification policies assume that all TSPs have equal skill and experience and the current system requires that all TSPs complete all certification steps regardless of experience. A more flexible certification policy that allowed TSPs with higher experience levels decreased requirements would help streamline the TSP certification process without sacrificing the quality of deliverables.

A national NRCS TSP Certification Policy Review Committee should be established that is charged with reviewing both national and state NRCS TSP certification policy, with the goal of reducing unnecessary or duplicative TSP certification requirements.

Clear and Specific Standards for Conservation Programming Technical Assistance Should be Established to Ensure Similar Quality Deliverables are being Provided by NRCS Employees and TSPs

In working with CNMP preparation across the United States, it has become very apparent to me that the quality of CNMPs being prepared by both NRCS employees and third party TSPs vary considerably. While there is a large variation in the quality of plans being prepared by different NRCS employees and different TSPs, it is my experience that generally the quality of CNMPs prepared by TSPs is higher than that of CNMPs being prepared by NRCS employees.

The current national NRCS CNMP guidance is essentially a listing of the components that should be included in a CNMP, with no specific guidance on how these components should be prepared. While it is true that every state is unique, the basic components that should be included in a CNMP are national in nature. All farmers, regardless of location, deserve to be provided the highest quality conservation program technical assistance that can be provided by USDA. This is true whether the assistance is provided by NRCS employees or third party TSPs.

The national level NRCS should establish clear and specific conservation program assistance examples that meet the minimum quality requirements across the nation. Specifically, meaningful example CNMPs should be established for beef, dairy, swine, layer and broiler enterprises that establish minimum content and quality levels.

Improved Follow-up and Assistance with Conservation Planning Implementation

Technical assistance with conservation programs, whether provided by NRCS employees or third party TSPs, is planning assistance. Many times there is a disconnect between preparing the plan and implementing the plan at the farm level that is never bridged. In my opinion this is a larger issue for conservation planning assistance provided by TSPs for the simple reason that no funds are currently provided to TSPs for continued plan follow-up.

Funds Should be Made Available to Cover the Cost of Follow-up by TSPs to Assist Producers With Planned Conservation Programming Implementation

Conservation planning assistance that is not implemented, or not implemented correctly fails to provide the planned conservation benefits. In many cases TSPs develop plans that are not implemented at all, or not implemented as planned on the farm. Continued interaction and follow-up by the plan provider and the farmer increases the probability that conservation planning assistance will be implemented in an effective and timely manner. Currently TSPs are not provided with funds to complete meaningful post planning follow-up regarding plan implementation.

Funds should be made available to cover the cost of providing extended follow-up assistance with conservation planning implementation to farmers who have received conservation planning technical assistance.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.
Mr. Dlugosz?

**STATEMENT OF STEVE DLUGOSZ, CERTIFIED CROP ADVISOR
AND LEAD AGRONOMIST, HARVEST LAND CO-OP, MADISON,
WI; ON BEHALF OF INTERNATIONAL CERTIFIED CROP
ADVISER PROGRAM; AND AMERICAN SOCIETY OF
AGRONOMY**

Mr. DLUGOSZ. Good afternoon. My name is Steve Dlugosz. I am a Certified Crop Advisor from Indiana, and it is a pleasure being here. I represent the Certified Crop Advisor Program and the American Society of Agronomy.

I think it is kind of providential I am following Dr. Burns here. Many of my comments will be of a similar thread as I go through my testimony.

Currently, there are approximately 13,000 certified crop advisors in the United States and Canada, with new programs actually beginning in India and Argentina. The qualifications required to become certified includes two comprehensive exams, education, experience, and signing a code of ethics. We maintain our certification through continuing education hours, of which we require 40 over 2 years.

CCAs are committed to working with their grower customers in adopting best management practices that are both economically and environmentally sound. The CCA is considered a business partner with the grower. Both of us have a lot to gain and a lot to lose, depending on how the recommendations are made.

CCAs are currently recognized by NRCS as technical service providers in nutrient management, pest management, and tillage practices. CCAs are also recognized by the Risk Management Agency as agricultural experts related to crop insurance claims.

I actually represent a large percentage of the current TSPs that are practicing, and an even larger pool of potential TSPs for somewhere down the road.

I would like to share with you two areas of concern that we have expressed by CCAs who are currently TSPs: number one, the ability and knowledge of the county-based staff as it relates to produc-

tion agriculture; and, number two, the inconsistency of paperwork and requirements between states and counties.

Bottom line, the relationship at the county level between CCAs and that local NRCS staff is critical to the success of the TSP program. Unfortunately, there is a wide disparity between some county offices. Some DCs are very receptive to the concept and work closely with their CCA to implement the program. In those counties, more nutrient management plans were adopted and implemented.

In one example, it went as far as the DC actually asking the CCA to help promote and sell the program to other growers. As a result, they had more plans, and all of the participating farmers have EQIP contracts. Unfortunately, in the neighboring county, the exact opposite was true.

We always know there will be a degree of difference between individuals and how they perform their job functions, but the degree of difference that exists today is far too wide to be effective.

We would like to propose a two-part solution. First, to improve the ability of local NRCS staff at the county level and gain consistency between states and counties, NRCS should require that all agronomy-focused staff become certified crop advisors or certified professional agronomists. NRCS already requires professional certification or licensing for engineers, land surveyors, and other professional staff, so this would be very consistent to include the current agronomy staff. We believe it would help to improve the overall performance and delivery of conservation practices.

The second part of the solution would be to allow county-based personnel to cross county lines, so if you have someone who is very motivated and highly active in this area, they could move freely between counties and get those programs going. Currently, we are limited to where we live and where we work.

The other area I mentioned was the inconsistency of paperwork requirements. There appears to be a gap between paperwork required between states and even between counties within states, as reported by many of our CCAs who are TSPs. A potential solution would be to standardize the paperwork across county and state lines. We would suggest bringing together a group of CCAs who have experience being a TSP, bringing together some NRCS personnel who also have experience in TSP, and let them work together to design a standard set of documents and forms. It would save time and money in the long term.

In summary, the relationship between the CCA and county NRCS staff is very critical to the successful delivery of conservation practices on the ground. CCAs have a longstanding and trusted business relationship with the farmer. CCAs know and understand crop production practices. There is a great potential to expand conservation through this partnership approach, and ASA and ICCA are willing and able to be partners with USDA to do so.

We appreciate the time to speak today. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Dlugosz follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF STEVE DLUGOSZ, CERTIFIED CROP ADVISER AND LEAD AGRONOMIST, HARVEST LAND CO-OP, MADISON, WI; ON BEHALF OF INTERNATIONAL CERTIFIED CROP ADVISER PROGRAM; AND AMERICAN SOCIETY OF AGRONOMY

The International Certified Crop Adviser (ICCA) Program is a voluntary professional certification program of the American Society of Agronomy (ASA). Of the many individuals starting the certification process, only 62% are successful and become Certified Crop Advisers. Currently there are approximately 13,000 Certified Crop Advisers (CCAs) throughout the United States and Canada, with new programs beginning in India and Argentina.

A CCA provides both agronomic advice and information as well as, in many cases, agronomic inputs to growers. Being a CCA separates us from those who simply supply (sell) crop production inputs, as we provide services and make recommendations for the appropriate inputs. Over 85% of the CCAs work for an Ag Retail or Farm Cooperative type business, while others may have their own business providing only services, or work for USDA NRCS, Cooperative Extension, or state/local government agencies.

Qualifications required to become and remain a CCA:

1. *Exams:*

Pass two comprehensive exams covering four primary competency areas:

- a. nutrient management.
- b. soil and water management.
- c. integrated pest management.
- d. crop management.

2. *Education and Experience:*

- a. Bachelors of Science (BS) degree in Agronomy or a closely related field with at least 2 years of experience; or
- b. Associates Degree (2 years) in Agriculture with minimum of fifteen credits in agronomy related course work with 3 years of experience; or
- c. A degree that does not relate to agronomy or no degree post high school with at least 4 years of experience.

3. *Ethics:*

Every CCA must sign and agree to uphold the CCA Code of Ethics, pledging to do what is in the best interests of the land owner. Violation of this code could lead to de-certification.

4. *Maintenance:*

To maintain their certification, a CCA must earn forty hours of continuing education every 2 years. There must be at least 5 hours in each of the four primary competency areas: nutrient management; soil and water management; integrated pest management; and crop management.

A CCA is committed to working with their grower customers in adopting the best management practices that are both economically and environmentally sound. A CCA is considered a business partner to the grower because both have a lot to gain or lose based on the recommendations that are made. A large producer survey conducted by Purdue University's Center for Food and Agriculture Business indicated that farmers ranked honesty and technological competence as the top two characteristics of their suppliers. The ICCA Program strives to ensure that CCAs meet both requirements through the code of ethics and continuing education standards.

CCAs are recognized by USDA–NRCS as Technical Service Providers (TSP) in nutrient management, pest management and residue management or tillage practices. There are 1,220 TSPs throughout the United States; of those, 353 TSPs (29% of the total) identify as CCAs. (numbers provided by NRCS). CCAs are also recognized by the Risk Management Agency (RMA) as agricultural experts related to crop insurance claims.

For a CCA to become and maintain a TSP standing:

1. A CCA registers with USDA–NRCS through their online TechReg site. A CCA must provide their CCA number which is verified by ASA. The categories that the CCA plans to work under are self identified during the registration process. The MOU that ASA ICCA signed with USDA–NRCS requires that the CCA maintain their CCA status and register with NRCS every 3 years.
2. Depending on the state's interpretation of the TSP rules, the state NRCS office may require the CCA to complete additional training. However, this is not

supposed to be the case since the 2008 Farm Bill standardized the registration process.

3. Maintenance requires registering every 3 years and keeping their CCA designation active.

Early on in the TSP Program, there were approximately 2,200 TSPs throughout the U.S., 51% of which were CCAs. As the program matured, rules were changed and states enacted state-specific requirements, in essence ignoring the MOU standards. This led to many of the CCAs dropping out of the TSP program and a precipitous decline in the number of private sector CCAs involved.

The ICCA Program and ASA have worked with USDA NRCS to evaluate the TSP system and have proposed changes for the future. Those changes were developed by a group of CCAs and NRCS staff with experience working directly with the program. The new system was 'pilot tested' in eight states. Although the volume was low, the overall recommendation was to implement the new system nationally. Unfortunately, to date, that has not been done.

Experiences from the field:

Overall, in the beginning of the TSP Program, CCAs viewed it as a business opportunity to become "more partnered with the grower" and more completely serve their customer base. It was viewed as a way to get better nutrient management planning and quicker adoption of new technologies done in a way that might increase farm revenue or avoid increased production costs. As time progressed it became more of a challenge than it was worth, yielding a high drop-out rate by private sector CCAs. There have been changes made to the system that have helped improve it. Not-to-exceed rates were discontinued and payments were supposed to take into account local market conditions, while farmers were allowed to select the TSP.

County Level Technical Assistance

The relationship between CCAs and local county office NRCS staff is critical to the success of the TSP Program. Unfortunately, there is a wide disparity between NRCS county offices as far as the ability and understanding of the local staff. Some District Conservationists (DC) were very receptive to the concept and worked closely with CCAs to implement the program. In those counties, more nutrient management plans were adopted and implemented. In one example, it went as far as the DC asking the CCA to help "sell" nutrient management planning to farmers. This resulted in more plans and all participating farmers having EQIP contracts. In a neighboring county, the DC was not in favor of having TSPs. They were very defensive and dismissive to the point of discouraging involvement by CCAs, resulting in a very low implementation rate of nutrient management plans by farmers.

There will always be a degree of difference between individuals in how they perform their job functions, but the degree that exists today is far too wide to be appropriate. It is exaggerated by the lack of agricultural background and knowledge at the county position level. The skill or knowledge level is also typically based on traditional NRCS practice work, specifically engineering related practices. There is, at times, a component of engineering that is required such as storage structures or earth moving, but nutrient management planning is not only engineering focused. The land application of manure does not require an engineer. It requires a Certified Crop Adviser, Certified Professional Agronomist or Certified Professional Soil Scientist who understands agronomic production practices. The same can be said for pest management planning.

One of the original goals of TSP was to take advantage of the private sector professional in the field that already had the relationship with the farmer and understood what production practices were in place so there would be quicker adoption of new practices to improve conservation implementation. Farmers know and trust their CCAs. They have a long standing business relationship with them. Farmers do not on average want the government telling them what to do or in many cases even know what they are doing. The CCA is more knowledgeable and understands agronomic production practices better. For example, a DC told the grower that they needed to lime their fields but the nutrient management plan developed by a CCA based on soil sampling recommendations did not call for lime. Lime was not needed based on the science but lime is considered a soil amendment and lime payments are based on "traditions". The CCA argued that based on the science lime was not needed and would be a waste of money. The DC would not release the payments to the farmer until the farmer applied lime.

Solutions: There are two parts. First, to improve the ability of local NRCS staff at the county and state levels and gain consistency between states and counties, requires that all agronomy focused staff become Certified Crop Advisers or Certified Professional Agronomists. The ICCA Program first qualifies a person through exam-

ination and credential review. Then they grow their knowledge and skills through the continuing education requirements. NRCS already requires professional certification or licensing for engineers, land surveyors and other professional staff. Why not include agronomy and soils focused staff? It would help improve the overall performance and delivery of conservation practices. The second part to the solution would be to allow county based personnel to cross county lines so if there is a highly interested and talented individual in nutrient management planning for example, allow them to work in multiple counties and focus on their strengths.

Finding qualified agronomy professionals is a challenge for everyone in agriculture today. There is a growing demand for the professionals but fewer students are taking up the study. ASA is currently working with other scientific associations and industry organizations to try to attract more individuals to the profession.

Inconsistency on Paperwork Requirements

There appears to be a gap between what paperwork is required between states and between counties within states as reported by TSPs who are CCAs.

Solution: Standardize the paperwork across county and state lines. Bring together a group of CCAs who have experience of being a TSP and have them work with local NRCS employees who also have experience working with TSPs to design a standard set of documents and forms.

Summary:

The relationship between the CCA TSP and the local county level NRCS staff is very critical to the successful delivery of conservation practices on the ground. A positive and mutually supportive relationship yields a higher adoption rate of practices on the farm which ultimately should lead to improved environmental conditions in that local area. NRCS should capitalize on the existing MOU they have with ASA to fully implement the TSP program and fully engage the CCAs working in the private sector. CCAs have a long standing and trusted business relationship with the farmer. CCAs know and understand plant and soil-based production agriculture. NRCS should utilize CCAs to expand their delivery of technical assistance and the adoption rate of conservation practices. At the same time, by requiring professional certification for all staff that deliver or evaluate technical assistance, NRCS will increase their internal capabilities and expertise. This is not a new concept for NRCS since they already require it of other non-agronomy or soil science related staff. There is great potential to expand conservation through this partnership approach and ASA and the ICCA Program are ready and willing to partner further with USDA to do so.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Braford?

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM L. BRAFORD, CONSULTING FORESTER, BLUECHIP FORESTRY, NATURAL BRIDGE STATION, VA; ON BEHALF OF AMERICAN FOREST FOUNDATION

Mr. BRAFORD. Chairman Holden, Ranking Member Goodlatte, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss my experiences with the administration and delivery of the USDA conservation programs, specifically focusing on delivery to America's over ten million family forest owners.

My name is Bill Braford. I am a consulting forester and a certified forester with the Society of American Foresters. I am retired from the Virginia Department of Forestry and working with my father as a beef cattle farmer and doing forestry consulting at the same time. In addition to some of my experiences, I am one of the only two consulting foresters in Virginia who are currently registered as a technical service provider through the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Today, I would like to focus my testimony on three key areas that I think are of great importance to the delivery of the conserva-

tion programs to family forest owners: first of all, the potential impact of conservation programs on family forest owners in Virginia and throughout the U.S.; second, the capacity for conservation program delivery to family forest owners in Virginia; and, last, the NRCS Technical Service Provider program as it relates to forestry assistance.

As far as the impact, I would kind of like to give an illustration. When I started with the Virginia Department of Forestry around about 1975, there were some bark beetle problems, and a lot of the landowners that I found myself servicing had just done a lot of harvesting. At that time, I was concerned because there wasn't any cost share. But the forestry incentive program developed by the USDA came along, and those amounted to a lot of good work.

As a matter of fact, if you go back to 1974, those trees have grown. They have been thinned once or twice. They are now 35 years old. Those trees, being higher-quality pine, in eastern Virginia, are servicing some sawmills. Mr. Ken Morgan in Red Oak, Virginia, has put a lot of investment in infrastructure in the last 4 years, in spite of the recession, adding jobs. And these trees are going to be what he needs to keep his mill going, especially with this economic situation.

Second, if you look at the capacity for conservation programs delivery to family forest owners in Virginia, if I kind of go back to my career as a service forester, we were trying to get 50 forest management plans per year. I found it difficult to do that. For one thing, with all the other programs that were going, it seemed like the forest management plan was the most difficult for me to do. I found it very helpful when I had another forester come in and just take on that specific program. That seemed to work well, and I think the same thing applies to technical service providers and consultant foresters.

We also had the Forest Stewardship Program for the last 4 or 5 years that paid consultant foresters to do forest management plans. That seemed to work quite well and served the same purposes I had needed when I was a county forester.

From the technical services provider program, I found it was somewhat difficult to go through the process. I was very impressed with all of the Internet information. That gave me pretty good experience, but it took a lot of time. I think maybe that is the reason we only have two out of about 150 consultants that actually have signed up as a technical service provider.

I guess I am at the end of my part of it. But I would like to summarize by saying that, number one, I think forestry is a long-term investment that needs to be looked at. If we have the ebb and flow of different incentive programs, we are likely to end up with low reforestation in a period of 10 years, which could have results 30, 40 years from now.

Second, I am excited about the partnership between, not only TSPs and the agencies, but all the agencies working together. For example, the American Forest Foundation has put together a brochure that explains some of the USDA farm bill programs, which I found quite helpful.

And last, I might suggest that, due to the complexity of the TSP program, maybe we could jump-start that program with some type

of different cost share, maybe a little bit more streamlined with more involvement of consultant foresters.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Braford follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF WILLIAM L. BRAFORD, CONSULTING FORESTER, BLUECHIP FORESTRY, NATURAL BRIDGE STATION, VA; ON BEHALF OF AMERICAN FOREST FOUNDATION

Chairman Holden, Ranking Member Goodlatte, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss my experiences with the administration and delivery of the USDA conservation programs, specifically focusing on delivery to America's over ten million family forest owners.

My name is Bill Braford and I'm a consulting forester certified by the Society of American Foresters, an American Tree Farm System inspecting forester, and a tree and beef cattle farmer, based in Natural Bridge, Virginia. I've been a consulting forester for almost 8 years now, having retired from the Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) in 2002. At DOF, I served in numerous positions including as a service forester, a supervising forester, and as a forest water quality specialist, so I have extensive experience working with family forest owners.

In addition to this experience, I am one of only two consulting foresters in Virginia who are registered as Technical Service Providers through USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Today, I'd like to focus my testimony on three key areas that are of great importance to the delivery of the conservation programs to family forest owners:

- (1) The potential impact of conservation programs on family forest owners in Virginia and throughout the U.S.
- (2) Capacity for conservation program delivery to family forest owners in Virginia.
- (3) The NRCS Technical Service Provider program as it relates to forestry assistance.

Potential Impact of Conservation Programs on Family Forests

The Commonwealth of Virginia is blessed with tremendous forest resources, over 63% of which are owned by roughly 373,000 families and individuals, not corporations or the Federal or state government. Annually, Virginia's forests provide over \$27.5 billion in economic benefits to the state, including \$23 billion from the forest products industry alone.

Many of the Commonwealth's family forest owners are just like farmers, some produce timber or other products, but most are interested in passing their land on in their family and having a place to hunt and fish and enjoy. Virginia family forest owners hold an average of 75 acres of forest.

Given the extensive family forest ownership in Virginia, there is great potential to utilize the USDA conservation programs to accomplish conservation goals and address the pressing challenges facing our forests.

As required in the 2008 Farm Bill's forestry title, the Virginia Department of Forestry just completed an assessment and strategy around the Commonwealth's forest resources—Federal, state, and privately-owned.

The DOF identified a number of challenges for Virginia's forests in the coming years, including increasing wildfire threats, encroaching development placing pressure on forest owners to convert their forest to non-forest uses, sustainable management of forests as new markets emerge, and declines in reforestation rates.

Landowners that I work with are primarily interested in maintaining healthy forests that provide for future income along with other benefits such as wildlife habitat and just good shade to walk under on a hot summer day. Landowners in my area have stands of hardwoods that are nearing maturity and that are beginning to slow in growth. Landowners "east of the Blue Ridge Mountains" have both pine and hardwood forests. The pine component in eastern Virginia is mostly planted loblolly pine. The hardwoods develop naturally following timber harvests. The actual harvest of timber is forestry's primary tool for managing forests whether for wildlife, forest health or immediate income. Both long term and short term forest management planning are crucial in forest management. In 1975 I helped landowners in eastern Virginia reforest their cutover lands with the Forestry Incentives Program (FIP). These trees have been thinned once or twice and are now nearing maturity. Some have been harvested and replaced with younger trees. Conservation programs that provide some type of cost share have proven to be critical to offset the long

term horizons in forestry investments. These programs need to be constant over time to maintain a good distribution of forest types and age classes. Healthy, growing forests are less vulnerable to insect and disease attacks.

As a forester with experience working in both the public and private sectors, I've seen the ebb and flow of conservation assistance for family forest owners and the challenges it presents to implementing these programs and helping landowners. I was excited to see the improvements this Committee made in the farm bill, to provide family forest owners with access to the various conservation programs, just like farmers. This has great potential, given that farm bill program dollars are often more stable than relying on state program budgets.

In fact, mostly with the effort of DOF and the NRCS in the state, great progress has been made in implementing these programs. In the first year of implementation, the Farm Bill Conservation Programs provided roughly \$3.4 million in funding for forest projects in the state and enrolled 23,000 acres of forests in the Conservation Stewardship Program. Nationally, over \$143 million in EQIP funding alone, was spent on forestry practices.

Even with all this progress, I see a significant challenge ahead, in terms of delivery of these programs: the necessary capacity to truly serve family forest owners throughout the state does not exist in the Federal or state government agencies.

Capacity for Conservation Program Delivery in Virginia and Nationwide

As a consulting forester, I have learned how much landowners value the ability to have a resource professional walk with them on their property and help them achieve their vision for their forest. Federal, state and private sectors all have important roles in providing the infrastructure that delivers technical assistance to forest landowners.

Even as great progress has been made in implementing and delivering conservation programs to forest owners in the state, this progress is limited by the capacity in the Federal and state agencies. The task of providing assistance to the over 300,000 forest owners in Virginia, let alone the over ten million nationwide, is daunting to say the least. Most of the assistance that's been delivered so far has come through the DOF, which is facing severe budget challenges.

Nationally, both the U.S. Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters have expressed concern over the lack of capacity to fully serve America's family forest owners, so they can continue to provide the values and benefits we all gain from their forests.

In my view, the needed growth in capacity will have to come from non-governmental organizations and the private sector—through consulting foresters like myself. It will not come from larger agencies or more state and Federal programs because of both limited funding and the political limits on the number of government personnel.

There are roughly 150 consulting foresters in Virginia, many of whom are interested in helping deliver the conservation programs to forest owners, if they are able to at least break even on this.

An additional challenge for delivery of conservation programs to forest owners is the current lack of outreach on the program opportunities to forest owners in Virginia. While NRCS, DOF, and Extension have done some outreach, they simply do not have the capacity to engage significant numbers and make them aware of the opportunities. Engaging the consulting forester community in a meaningful way on this enables a win-win for the consultant and the agencies.

Another challenge I see is the relative complication of these programs for forest owners. While the programs may also be complicated for farmers and ranchers, I think this issue is compounded by the fact that there are not many within the agencies that understand the programs and how they apply to forests, making it even more difficult for the landowner.

With my TSP certification, I have begun to talk with landowners about the program opportunities. At this point, only two owners have been interested in developing forest management plans, which are funded through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. These landowners were interested in developing a management plan because they wanted to get started on a plan to improve their forest. They also were very interested in getting started with a cost-share program, both to complete the plan and implement recommendations such as tree planting. I contracted with one of these landowners, to develop a management plan on about 15 acres of their forest. I was able to combine the initial visit with the field work which required about 5 hours. The parcels I examined were part of a subdivision of similar-sized wooded lots. The land was gently rolling with an oak-hickory forest type. The landowner specifically wanted a plan that would help improve wildlife habitat, maintain forest health, and improve the productive capacity of the forest.

The office process, completing all the required paperwork and details for the program, took me much more time than the field visit. Currently, I have had no additional request for forest management plans. I had anticipated additional work to justify my TSP processing time.

I did have an opportunity to sign up another landowner who was interested in managing his forest for timber, wildlife and recreation as well as qualifying for land use taxation. After suggesting the NRCS EQIP cost-share funding for the development of his forest management plan, we mutually decided that the process was too complex. I completed the plan for him with a bill for my time. He did not apply for cost share and I'm not aware of any practices he's completed to implement the plan.

The NRCS Technical Service Provider Program As It Relates to Forestry Assistance

One of the keys to successfully engaging the private sector in delivering conservation programs is the NRCS's Technical Service Provider (TSP) Program. It is my understanding that this program was designed to engage the private sector, consulting foresters like me, in delivery of the conservation programs.

Well, I'm here today as one of only two consulting foresters in the Virginia that is a TSP—meaning landowners who wish to use a consultant to participate in the program, have only two foresters that they can engage. I may be efficient, but I certainly can't service the hundreds of thousands of landowners that could use some of the assistance under the programs. I also know the other consultant who is a TSP and he would face the same limitations.

The lack of consulting foresters that are participating in the TSP program is not for lack of interest. There are significant challenges with the Program that are evidenced by my experiences with becoming a TSP.

I've had experience with these kinds of programs in the past, and have seen them work successfully. For example, Virginia has utilized the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Stewardship Program in the past to provide cost-share assistance to landowners who wanted forest stewardship plans written by consultant foresters. Consultant foresters and DOF provided the outreach. Many consulting foresters were trained to write stewardship plans and the direct contract funding seemed to work.

For training and qualification as a Technical Service Provider with NRCS, the process was much more involved. After a visit to the Farm Service Agency office, an address conflict and a few phone calls I successfully created and activated USDA eAuthentication account during November 2009. Several times each week I logged onto the TechReg website and navigated to the various resources pages including the USDA AgLearn site (usually in 2 hour sessions). I finally completed all of the online training in February 2010. Some of the TSP orientation training was good.

Certified foresters (who already have extensive training and expertise) should not have to go through the forest management training. It was a good snow-covered winter to go through the process but I don't think I would have invested the time during a normal Virginia Winter. When I first signed up I was surprised to find out how little information there was about the Forest Management Plan 106 practice at the local NRCS offices. I fear that the outreach is not there because of the lack of TSP's and the TSP's are not there because of the lack of outreach (and the lack of potential for appropriate compensation).

Even as the TSP program faces significant challenges, I've heard from several national forester organizations that NRCS Chief Dave White has pledged his support and commitment to making the TSP program work for consultants, so TSPs become a viable option for landowners. He has instituted a streamlining team to improve the certification process and make the TSP program more workable and he has established two more positions on the TSP staff to help improve this program.

In a survey of consulting foresters that have gone through the TSP process, it took an average of 48 hours over a 4 month period to complete certification with current computer access and requirements. One hundred percent of the respondents rated the process as difficult to very difficult. Remember, this is all non-billable time to a consultant. Most consultants agree that some orientation to the conservation program requirements is very appropriate and are willing to attend a day long workshop or similar orientation that is time efficient.

I think it would be very appropriate for NRCS to rely on the existing, very credible forester certification programs provided by organizations like the Society of American Foresters or the Association of Consulting Foresters for verifying a forester's qualifications. Currently, while NRCS has MOUs with these organizations, there is no streamlined process for foresters who are already proven to be exceptionally qualified foresters.

Another issue is the payment rates for TSPs. While it is technically correct that a resource professional can charge more than what is listed on the "Not-to-exceed rate" for services posted on the Internet-based TechReg website, this is impractical. In reality, the landowner who sees these rates feels that this is the maximum rate anyone should ever have to pay for such services, as stated by the government. We need to look for another way of expressing the cap on the maximum government contribution for services.

Payments funneled through the landowner as reimbursements make the landowner sometimes unable to fund the work. Contracting directly with NRCS would provide a more direct and responsive mechanism for participation by both the TSP and the landowner. We suggest that NRCS continue to explore expansion of bundling services through cooperative agreements and requests-for-proposals. Larger consulting firms might be attracted to provide technical assistance through such requests.

There have been other problematic issues with the TSP program as well throughout the country. In some cases, states encouraged foresters to become certified, which they did, only to decide later that they would not offer forestry practices, leaving the consultant hanging after investing time and resources.

While there are many challenges with the current TSP program, I don't believe they are insurmountable. Consulting foresters truly do want to help landowners accomplish conservation objectives on their land and manage their land sustainably and are willing to work hard alongside Federal and state employees to make it happen.

In conclusion, I hope I've provided the Committee today with some valuable insights regarding the current delivery of the conservation programs to Virginia's family forest owners, based on my experiences and the experiences of others with whom I have spoken. The 2008 Farm Bill provided tremendous opportunities for improved conservation on family forest lands, in addition to agricultural lands. It's no surprise that this significant shift in direction of the programs has led to some bottlenecks and issues with respect to program delivery.

Successful implementation and delivery to family forest owners is possible, if improvements are made to engage the nation's consulting foresters, who stand ready and willing to assist in this important effort.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Lohr, you said your proposal would allow NRCS employees to spend 75 percent of the time in the field. How much time do you think they spend in the field now compared to the office?

Mr. LOHR. It is probably, in my situation, observing my office in Greensburg, it is probably close to that now. But, again, I would have no way to measure that exactly.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay.

Mr. Leathers, you said you come across new opportunities every week. Do you care to expand on what those opportunities are and what can we do to help you take advantage of them?

Mr. LEATHERS. Mr. Chairman, thank you for the question.

You know, various partners have come to us and asked us to help with their initiatives. For example, the Pennsylvania Game Commission came to us to ask for help with the two CREP initiatives.

As we move forward with those programs, what is important is just that we have available CTA funding so NRCS can come on as a partner in those states, as well.

The CHAIRMAN. When you talk about the Pennsylvania situation, that is moving money from the western CREP to the Lower Susquehanna?

Mr. LEATHERS. I believe so. There are two different CREP initiatives, sir, and we are looking for the amendment that fully funds the Susquehanna, yes, and the Delaware CREP.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes. I am familiar with that. I also just want to mention, I do have producers concerned about what that will do to rental prices, too. So we have to be careful and take a good look at that.

Director Manley, do you care to address any new opportunities that you have come across that we can help you with?

Dr. MANLEY. I think as we move into this implementation of the 2008 Farm Bill, if we could—we have a staff that has all the engineers, biologists, administrative folks. I mean, we can turnkey big blocks of conservation delivery for you guys.

I think if there was a way that the funding, both FA and TA funding, and projects could be bundled and assigned to us in large blocks to make big differences for the state NRCS offices, that those administrative barriers could be removed where we could be used in that degree.

The CHAIRMAN. Dr. Burns, you talked about the inconsistencies at the national, state, and local level. You talked about it a great deal, but you mentioned six states. Can you elaborate—I don't think you mentioned the name of the states, but six states. Is that the model we should be following? Can you elaborate on that?

Dr. BURNS. I mentioned about a dozen states that are currently not following the national certification.

And I guess it is important to realize that, first, NRCS is not in the certification process. They have looked to third-party groups, such as the CCAs, such as universities, to actually certify and educate and qualify the technical service providers to do this work.

The situation in the environment now with this lack of consistency is that it is very difficult to actually operate a national certification program because it is not national. In fact, the decision was made at Iowa State University, the program that I led, we closed it at the end of June of this year. We ended the program because we said we cannot serve a national audience because the national certification is not being enforced or followed.

So that is why I think the recommendation that there actually be some more emphasis put on the policy at the national level, that it be enforced, it be followed, that a committee be established to look at what is going on in the states. Chief White mentioned that they are looking hard now as new requirements come, but it is important to recognize there is already a lot of water over the bridge and many, many states that don't operate following that national policy.

And all states are unique, but if they want to have groups do this certification and not do it themselves, they are going to have to give us an environment that we can function within. Because we receive no funding from NRCS of any form to do this certification; it is a fee-based program. So when our program does not have enough value for the TSPs to come to, because it doesn't work in enough states anymore, then we can't draw the numbers to continue it.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

The gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Goodlatte?

Mr. GOODLATTE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Braford, welcome. We are delighted to have you from the beautiful Rock Ridge County area, and we appreciate your being willing to come to Washington and testify for us.

As I am sure you are aware, Virginia's forest industry is struggling, especially due to the recent Franklin International Paper Mill being shut down. Also, many smaller facilities in my district are going through some very tough times.

What impact does the loss of these mills have on Virginia's forest owners and their ability to keep their forests healthy?

Mr. BRAFORD. Well, it is just a matter of markets. They need to have the outlook of knowing that their forest can be a profitable investment. I think that the need for incentives to invest, reinvest in the future is at a, kind of, a question mark right now. So, incentives can continue with that long-term investment.

Mr. GOODLATTE. The further they have to look to find markets for their wood, the further they have to ship it, the less attractive that investment is and the less resources they have available to maintain a healthy forest. Is that correct?

Mr. BRAFORD. That is correct.

Mr. GOODLATTE. And how can the conservation programs that we have been talking about here today, which can provide some resources to help improve forest management, fill some of the void left by the loss of markets?

Mr. BRAFORD. I guess I could pretty much repeat the other parties. The main thing would be to invest, with the idea that they will gain profits in the long term. Forestry has the disadvantage of being longer-term than agriculture.

Mr. GOODLATTE. And based on your testimony and experiences, it appears that you are not hearing a lot of demand for the conservation programs from forest owners in Virginia. This could be because Virginia forest owners don't have a need for the programs. But, based on my experience, talking with my constituents, they have their share of management challenges, like gypsy moth infestations and wildfire risks and complying with state water quality requirements.

Why do you think landowners are not eager to participate in these programs?

Mr. BRAFORD. Well, I think the participation is there when they need it. The bad part is that, when insects and disease happen after the fact, then they need to react proactively. And when they have to do salvage cuts, then that is less than ideal.

I think that some of the loggers are actually taking advantage of some of these conservation programs on BMPs. And so we may not see the activity from the landowners, but it is there in the third party, because they are working with loggers on those same conservation items.

Mr. GOODLATTE. You mentioned that you are both a forester for the tree farm program and a tree farmer yourself. And I know these programs have had success in reaching out to Virginia's landowners and encouraging forest conservation and good management, with the support of the Virginia Forestry Association.

Do you think there are opportunities for the NRCS to partner more with organizations like this to do the landowner outreach and assistance in Virginia?

Mr. BRAFORD. I do. The experience I have had as a TSP is a good indication that we need more than just promotion from the NRCS. For example, I have only had one request for a forest management plan. I think, with the cooperation of consultant foresters of Virginia Tech, Virginia Department of Forestry, which is actually quite good right now, is essential for outreach.

Mr. GOODLATTE. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, let me just throw out one more question to whoever on the panel would like to respond to this.

In the next farm bill, we may have to make some very tough choices on program funding. Can an improved TSP program help save administration costs, but still increase on-the-ground conservation? Can we make these programs work more efficiently and save some money and still do more good?

Mr. DLUGOSZ. I guess I would weigh in. The certified crop advisors, we have 13,000 certified crop advisors currently out there. Not all of them, this is not necessarily their area of expertise, but just name whatever percent you want, that is a lot of people.

I think if we could kind of empower those people, kind of encourage them to clean a few details up, that might be a pretty good pool that exists right now. And they are anxious to help add value to the farm.

Mr. GOODLATTE. Anyone else? Dr. Manley?

Dr. MANLEY. Yes, sir, I would like to add that, just with the same budget that you may have today, if we were to be able to allow the flexibility of the financial assistance funds and TA assistance funds to make sure that no funds overall were left on the table at the end of a fiscal year, that type of flexibility would make a big difference in many states.

Mr. GOODLATTE. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair thanks the gentleman and recognizes the gentleman from Kansas, Mr. Moran.

Mr. MORAN. Mr. Chairman, thank you again.

Mr. Lohr, you have a suggestion in your testimony that farm and conservation programs can be delivered more effectively and efficiently. Perhaps my thought arises in response to Mr. Goodlatte's question. I am interested in hearing more about that suggestion.

First, how does your suggestion translate into savings for the Federal Government?

And then, second, if you are a producer, a farmer, or a rancher, how will the way that you sign up for those farm programs change? In other words, would you walk me through the process that a farmer would sign up for the program, how would it be different than how we do that today?

And, third, can any of this be done with the current computer system that USDA has in place?

Mr. LOHR. I will try working from number three backwards, and maybe you can prompt me with the other ones as I get there.

The current IT system in place, as was mentioned earlier, is an antiquated system. And we feel that the MIDAS project and the NRCS's streamlining initiative are critical in getting that done.

I go back 30 years in this business and saw this work in the first half of my career with conservation programs, where NRCS was

the technical agency and FSA was the administrative agency in those situations. And we believe that that can work again.

The software platform or the IT platform is basically the same. We are on the same computer network and system. So some software enhancements would be necessary to make that kind of thing work. Our staff is already trained, as is NRCS, in GIS software. Unfortunately, we have different platforms. They have Tool Kit; we have ArcGIS. So that needs some work. So that would be probably my response for the third question.

Could you prompt me on the second?

Mr. MORAN. Yes. The other two questions related to what savings could government expect, the Federal Government expect, from your proposal?

Mr. LOHR. Well, we did some searching for numbers that shows that, in Fiscal Year 2009, the salary and expense appropriation for FSA was a little over \$1 billion, and we delivered almost \$17 billion in farm program benefits. And that works out to be a little less than 7¢ on the dollar to deliver programs, and we feel we would bring that efficiency to the table.

Additionally, we just see so much redundancy out there in terms of program application. Producers really need to determine early on if they are going to be eligible from the standpoint of actively engaged in agriculture, conservation compliance, adjusted gross income. And we think we can bring that to the table also, in terms of producers making applications and determining early if they are going to qualify for these programs.

Mr. MORAN. The final question was about how it would affect a farmer. Would the process for sign-up, participation, would it be different?

Mr. LOHR. Sure, it is going to be different. We hope that the automation will help with that.

It has been mentioned here about online capabilities. Unfortunately, the real world out there shows that many farmers don't have that capability. They are still going to have to visit our offices to make those applications. And, as I presented in my testimony, we feel that we have the staff in the office continuously to service the farmer and help them make those applications.

NRCS needs to be in the field, and we feel we can provide a better service to clients.

Mr. MORAN. Mr. Robinson, do you have any response or commentary upon what Mr. Lohr had to say?

Mr. ROBINSON. Well, from the conservation districts standpoint, we want what is best for conversation on the ground. If you will allow me, I will answer it from a producer standpoint. And I realize, I am the only one sitting at the table that is a producer.

My experience has been that, to go in—and I did have the opportunity at one point, a couple years ago, that I had two projects. One went through NRCS, one went through FSA. I constructed them at the same exact time, went through both processes at the same time.

I felt, as a producer, the NRCS process was a little more streamlined, a little easier. When I turned in the bills, the check came quicker than through the FSA process. Not to say that something

hasn't changed in the last 2 years in the computer world, but that was my experience at that time.

Mr. MORAN. Thank you all for your testimony. I appreciate being able to hear what you have to say.

And I thank the Chairman and the Ranking Member for their courtesy today.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair thanks the gentleman.

And I would like to thank our witnesses for their testimony today.

Under the rules of the Committee, the record of today's hearing will remain open for 10 calendar days to receive additional material and written responses from the witnesses to any question posed by a Member.

This hearing of the Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research is adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:30 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

[Material submitted for inclusion in the record follows:]

SUBMITTED LETTER BY HON. BLAINE LUETKEMEYER, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS
FROM MISSOURI

June 16, 2010

Hon. BLAINE LUETKEMEYER,
Member,
U.S. House of Representatives,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Congressman Luetkemeyer:

Thank you for your letter of April 28, 2010, regarding the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) construction of shallow water habitat for the pallid sturgeon in the Missouri River and the possible threats to the river ecosystem.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2003 Amendment to the "2000 Biological Opinion of the Operation of the Missouri River Main Stem Reservoir System, Operation and Maintenance of the Missouri River Bank Stabilization and Navigation Project, and Operation of the Kansas River Reservoir System" requires the USACE to construct 20 to 30 acres of shallow water habitat per river mile in the lower reaches of the Missouri River as part of the recovery efforts for endangered species. The primary means of accomplishing this habitat restoration is through the construction of chutes and backwater habitat, which results in the intentional discharge of the dredged sediment directly into the river.

Prior to human intervention, the Missouri River was an uncontrolled, active river meandering from bluff to bluff and constantly cutting new channels resulting in tremendous quantities of river-borne sediment from the channel and bank erosion. However, alteration of the main stem of the Missouri River has reduced sediment delivery to the Gulf of Mexico by limiting the natural erosion processes. This has caused a chain effect of impacts, including the Federal listing of three species (Pallid Sturgeon, Piping Plover, and Least Tern) and a significant loss of coastal wetlands. The value of this sediment, if deposited correctly, in forming coastal wetlands that act as "shock absorbers" during hurricanes is now widely recognized. It is highly unlikely that the relatively insignificant temporary discharge of sediments and nutrients from chute and backwater restorations has had any significant bearing on the hypoxia issue in the Gulf of Mexico, especially considering that it is the significant reduction in the transport of sediment that appears to be the root cause in the degradation of coastal wetlands.

The proportion of discharged sediment to sediment already in the stream is also an important consideration. A recent chute restoration project involved the dredging and discharge of 350,000 cubic yards of sediment. The 10 year daily average suspended sediment load at Nebraska City was approximately 200,000 cubic yards per day, so the discharged sediment was equivalent to only 1.5 days of sediment discharge. Therefore, sediment discharged into the river from chute restoration projects is a small fraction of the total yearly sediment carried by the river. Moreover, sediment discharges from restoration activities are a one-time event, so the short-term impact is likely well worth the long-term gain in shallow water aquatic habitat for a wide array of fish and wildlife species.

Again, thank you for writing. I appreciate your concern and assure you that the Department of Agriculture is working to protect the natural resources in the Missouri River Basin. If I can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Hon. THOMAS J. VILSACK,
Secretary,
U.S. Department of Agriculture.

SUBMITTED STATEMENT BY JENNIFER MOCK SCHAEFFER, AGRICULTURE
CONSERVATION POLICY ANALYST, ASSOCIATION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE AGENCIES

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Jennifer Mock Schaeffer and I am the Agriculture Conservation Policy Analyst for the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. I am a professional wildlife biologist with a B.S. in Agriculture and an M.S. in Range and Wildlife Management. One of my responsibilities is to work with the state fish and wildlife agencies to enhance delivery of biological

technical assistance available to USDA and to America's farmers, ranchers and forest land owners. The purpose of my testimony is to provide more insight into the diversity, depth and roles that state fish and wildlife agencies play with their conservation partners in delivering biological technical assistance to USDA and its clients.

The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (Association) represents the state fish and wildlife agencies' interests in fish and wildlife management including the Farm Bill. The Association's mission is to protect state authority and support provincial and territorial authority for fish and wildlife conservation; promote sound resource management; and strengthen Federal, state, territorial and private cooperation in conserving fish, wildlife and their habitats in the public interest based on scientific principles. The Association represents and assists all 50 states and territories in working toward the accomplishment of their individual fish and wildlife goals and objectives.

Mr. Chairman we appreciate and thank you and the Subcommittee for your strong support of the comprehensive array of conservation programs as demonstrated through reauthorization. The health, perpetuation and prosperity of our nation's fish and wildlife resources depend substantially on these conservation programs and their effective delivery on the ground.

Because approximately 70 percent of the land in the US is privately owned, the Farm Bill is the single most important piece of legislation for fish and wildlife habitat conservation on private lands. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) conservation programs have broad-reaching affects on fish and wildlife populations and conservation of their habitats. Many state fish and wildlife agencies have specialized divisions that focus on delivering biological technical assistance on private lands to help meet landowners' and operators' conservation goals and objectives while also enhancing habitat for public trust wildlife resources. Some of these private lands divisions in the Midwest and Southeast date back to the 1970's and have a long history of successfully working with private landowners and USDA, while other private lands programs were initiated more recently in the 1990's. Regardless of how long state fish and wildlife agencies' private lands divisions have been working with USDA and landowners, they continue to grow in emphasis and demand. Through state fish and wildlife agencies' conservation efforts in partnership with conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and USDA, implementation of past and current farm bill conservation programs has resulted in significant fish and wildlife conservation benefits provided through landscape level conservation actions.

Since FY 2002, the amount of financial assistance the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides has grown by 376 percent and the emphasis on wildlife habitat within the conservation title has grown significantly. Since FY 2005, the number of NRCS full time employees (FTEs) providing technical assistance through the Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) Program has unfortunately decreased 13 percent, and the number of NRCS biologists has declined by about 21% in the last 2.5 years. Together this means that there are fewer people on the ground to deliver biological technical assistance at a time when demand for such assistance continues to grow, and it is pivotal to delivering financial assistance into the hands of producers. This has increased the workload on NRCS staff and required more diverse fish and wildlife expertise than ever before. These trends have caused NRCS to stretch its technical staff to provide assistance outside of their areas of expertise and to look for alternative solutions to a shortage in technical staff. We currently see a snowball affect occurring—every year more contracts are signed, more landowners are enrolled, and more practices are planned but implementation, compliance, and restoration activities are not keeping pace. We believe NRCS is approaching an insurmountable workload that continues to accumulate from past enrollments because there is not enough boots on the ground providing the technical assistance needed for follow-through and project completion. Unfortunately, this means projects are not completed, contracts fall through and the funds this Subcommittee fought so hard for during the reauthorization becomes de-obligated and sent to the US Treasury instead of farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners. There are too many natural resource challenges across the country for this trend to continue and the only way we see to reverse the aforementioned "snowball affect" and avoid a critical tipping point is by increasing the technical assistance boots on the ground.

As a result, many state fish and wildlife agencies with their nongovernmental conservation partners are sharing the increased workload and providing much needed biological technical expertise to USDA and landowners/operators. Currently, we believe there are more partner biologists working in NRCS offices than there are NRCS biologists, helping to deliver biological technical assistance and to relieve some of the workload. Delivering biological technical assistance on private lands is

critical to helping state fish and wildlife agencies conserve their public trust wildlife resources and meet their conservation objectives, which is why they are dedicating staff capacity to working with USDA and their clients. The services that state fish and wildlife agency private lands divisions and partner biologists provide to landowners/operators and USDA range from conducting field tours/days, wildlife habitat and initiative workshops, and landowner and USDA training sessions on conservation planning, data entry, compliance checks, application and practice assistance, and inspections, to name a few.

As these difficult economic times continue with state budgets being cut 10–60% on top of hiring freezes, FTE caps, and ongoing unfilled vacancies, it is becoming increasingly difficult for some states to meet Federal match requirements. For some states the funds they are able to contribute to help pay for USDA biological technical assistance is dwindling, but states continue to shoulder a growing workload even though NRCS does not have the funds needed to fully reimburse cooperators for USDA work performed. This trend will continue at the expense of state fish and wildlife agency budgets unless steps are taken to provide more technical assistance funding to deliver conservation programs.

To compensate for the decline of state budgets and continue priority work with USDA, state fish and wildlife agencies have increased the number and diversity of conservation partnerships to provide the biological technical assistance that USDA needs and that landowners and operators want and deserve. Collaborative efforts to deliver biological technical assistance continue to grow between state fish and wildlife agencies and organizations such as Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, conservation districts, Intermountain West Joint Venture, and Playa Lakes Joint Venture, to name a few. Together we assemble the resources to put “partner biologists” in USDA service centers and local FSA and NRCS offices. The arrangements for partner biologists vary greatly from state to state regarding who pays for salary, benefits, travel, supervision, hiring, and training, but often partner biologists are supervised by the state fish and wildlife agency and work in an NRCS office. By pooling our financial resources and expertise, these “partner biologists” provide valuable knowledge, expertise, and resources to private landowners participating in voluntary, incentive-based farm bill conservation programs that are essential to achieving local, state, regional and national fish and wildlife conservation objectives. Without all of the partners involved, many producers’ biological technical assistance needs would go unmet. Together we leverage our diverse but specialized expertise to the benefit of USDA, producers and the wildlife resources we manage. Ultimately, the tax payer benefits from the leveraged funds that partners bring to USDA because it makes technical assistance funds go farther. Annually and collectively the state fish and wildlife agencies alone contribute millions of dollars and thousands of hours to delivering biological technical assistance because there is growing evidence that utilizing partner biologists results in more wildlife habitat on the ground and higher quality wildlife habitat long term.

Partner biologists accelerate private land benefits through farm bill programs by bringing specialized fish and wildlife knowledge and habitat management skills to numerous tasks and duties: conservation planning; outreach, education, marketing the fish and wildlife aspects of conservation programs and benefits of practices to farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners; facilitating timely implementation of planning, contracting, and practice implementation follow-through necessary to bring habitat projects to fruition; and being locally involved and thereby maintaining landowner trust.

We believe Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funds are needed for holistic conservation planning, so whole farm operations and their conservation objectives can be addressed from a landscape perspective and not just through the lens of one particular conservation program. In addition to more CTA funds, more flexibility between the amount of financial assistance and technical assistance in program funds is desperately needed. Some restoration activities such as wetlands and in-stream work require more intensive planning, permitting, engineering and expertise which have a higher cost of technical assistance. Because inadequate technical assistance funds are provided through CTA and conservation programs to complete these integral and vital components of restoration, contracts sit idle or become de-obligated, work goes undone and the backlog of restoration activities continues to grow.

State fish and wildlife agencies work directly with USDA to put partner biologists on the ground to effectively and efficiently deliver conservation programs and biological technical assistance. These states include Arizona, Idaho, Iowa, Missouri, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Specific examples of these partner biologists and their work are provided below.

North Carolina—North Carolina Wildlife Resources Division has co-located 3 biologists in NRCS offices since January 2005, and they primarily provide advice and guidance on WHIP, EQIP, CRP, WRP and occasionally other programs. These co-located biologists are directly involved in technical guidance on 10,000–15,000 acres of contracts each year.

Missouri—Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) has had a strong private land presence since its inception. By the 1970's there were 12 state Field Service Agents who were dedicated to private land efforts throughout the state, working closely with USDA at that time. In 1981, MDC started an expanded private land pilot program, one aspect of which was the very first “area biologist” position. That was expanded to two positions by 1983, and by the close of the pilot period (1986) resulted in direction to place an area biologist in each of the NRCS area offices. The old Field Service Agent position (now renamed) also remained.

The value of the area biologist concept was quickly realized when USDA rolled out CRP in 1986. Area Biologists also provided critical assistance in implementing Swampbuster provisions of the farm bill, as well as WRP. 1992 the first agreement with NRCS was crafted, and in 1993, MDC agreed to provide a Wetland Biologist at the NRCS state office to assist with efforts to apply WRP and EWRP (1993 flood). Initially conceived as a temporary position, it soon developed into a permanent position. In 1995 the Wetland Emphasis Team (WET) concept was developed, most with converted area biologists, and four WETs were added in the state. This also coincided with a decrease in the number of area offices in Missouri.

The Private Land Division was created within MDC in 1999. This effort resulted in multiple benefits:

- Expanded the old “Field Service Agent” concept from 12 statewide to its current staffing of 49 Private Land Conservationists, dedicated to working with private landowners on fish/forest/wildlife conservation.
- 3 Community Conservationists—working on urban planning issues.
- 4 WET Biologists focused on WRP and CRP wetland projects.
- 4 Area Biologists working on farm bill and fish/forest/wildlife planning with USDA.
- 1 Private Land Program Biologist, who supervises the WET biologists and provides farm bill assistance to NRCS state office staff.
- 1 Private Land Programs Supervisor.

The MDC–USDA partnership for delivering biological technical assistance has provided tremendous return on our investment and here are some of our accomplishments:

- 135,000 acres of WRP (5th highest in the nation), and poised to add another 9,200 acres this year. Pioneered the macrotopography concept in restoration.
- 1.4 million acres of CRP, including 26,000 acres of CREP. MO has the 3rd highest allocation of CP33 acres in the nation (currently enrolled 31,218 as of 3/31/10).
- MO has just received another \$1 million of EQIP funding aimed specifically at forestry resources, bringing the total forestry pool this year to \$2.2 million, which is one of the highest in the nation. Not counting FY10, MO has averaged \$1.27 million encumbered on fish/forest/wildlife practices FY06–FY09.
- For WHIP, MO has encumbered an average of \$907,000 FY06–FY09.
- MDC has spent about \$3 million on cost-share through CREP (\$2 million) and general CRP to promote the use of native grasses.

In Missouri, 93% of the state is in the hand of private landowners. They are the stewards in charge of the vast majority of Missouri's fish, forest and wildlife resources. As a group they have also indicated an overwhelming interest in the proper management and conservation of those resources—and have inundated MDC with requests for assistance in managing the natural resources on their property. USDA farm bill programs provide a vital resource to enable them to meet their personal goals for the management of these resources. The MDC has partnered with USDA for over 28 years to jointly tackle the effort of providing technical assistance to Missouri's private landowners on fish/forest/wildlife management.

Texas—Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) has had a liaison position with Texas NRCS from 1998–2009. Placement of the single TPWD farm bill coordinator in the state NRCS office led to an increase in wildlife focused farm bill program modifications originating in Texas that have been adopted by other states. This includes the creation of 6 EQIP Wildlife Resource Areas targeting at-risk species and amounting to over 600,000 acres of habitat restoration worth over \$11 mil-

lion in landowner Financial Assistance from 2003–2009. These EQIP focus areas were created and informed through workshops with landowners and have been well accepted as evidenced by their enrollment and participation.

Texas EQIP Wildlife Resource Areas

Area	No. of Contracts	Contract Acres	\$\$	Avg. \$/Contract	Avg. Cost/Acre
Attwater's Prairie Chicken/Bobwhite	36	73,511	\$2,846,777	\$79,077	\$38.73
Lesser Prairie Chicken/BT Prairie Dogs	72	97,745	\$1,622,562	\$22,536	\$16.60
Longleaf Pine/RC Woodpeckers. BWQ	15	1,164	\$229,814	\$15,321	\$197.43
Rolling Plains BWQ/Grassland Birds	124	221,708	\$4,758,660	\$38,376	\$21.46
Black-capped Vireo	8	5,518	\$331,501	\$41,438	\$60.08
Trans-Pecos Pronghorn Antelope	14	208,981	\$1,409,923	\$100,709	\$6.75
Totals	269	608,627	\$11,199,237	\$41,633	\$18.40

In addition to the EQIP areas, the state liaison position worked with NRCS to align WHIP with the state wildlife action plan and coordinate T&E species and other trainings for NRCS field staff.

Idaho—Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) has 3 partner biologist positions (farm bill coordinators) co-located in NRCS offices. IDFG has had agreements with NRCS since 2007 to work on CRP contracts as well as review all brush management projects funded under EQIP and WHIP. IDFG staff has been responsible for writing many of the plans for Idaho's SAFE program, they are also focusing on mid-contract management of CRP, and working with landowners on the new NRCS Sage-Grouse initiative.

Kentucky—Kentucky started sharing partner biologists with NRCS in 1998. Currently, there are 14 partner biologists and 2 biological technicians that are shared with NRCS. These partner biologists share the same workloads as their NRCS colleagues and work with landowners from beginning of an inquiry to the inspections and compliance checks that follow post-project completion.

South Carolina—Since 2003, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) has had a contribution agreement with NRCS to fund three farm bill Biologist positions in NRCS offices located in key geographic regions for priority wildlife species in South Carolina. SCDNR is providing 100% of the cost of salary and fringe benefits for these three employees through state and Federal funds (non-NRCS funds). NRCS provides office space, training, computers, network access, and vehicles for these employees as in-kind contributions.

Since 2003, these three positions combined have written approximately 205 Conservation Plans totaling over 150,000 acres. Landowner contacts have equaled or exceeded the total number of Conservation Plans. These farm bill Biologists were largely responsible for South Carolina's success in delivering over 6,000 acres of CP33 buffers, resulting in measurable increases in northern bobwhites and priority grassland bird species. Landowners have been extremely satisfied with the level and quality of service offered by the FB biologists, with many returning for additional technical or program assistance.

Since 2003, SCDNR has invested over \$350,000 of combined state and Federal dollars in the farm bill Biologist program. We see this as the greatest opportunity we have to facilitate delivery of technical information and financial assistance to the benefit of priority wildlife species and habitats. It works because SCDNR provides biological expertise in NRCS field offices, where it may otherwise be lacking, and their biologists function as full NRCS team members, shouldering significant workload which would otherwise be handled by an already-stretched NRCS staff.

Due to budgetary constraints in SCDNR which have restricted available state match dollars, one position has remained vacant since 2008 and two positions vacant since January, 2009. To date, SCDNR has received no direct financial assistance (cash) from NRCS for these positions. Additional similar positions throughout the state are needed to address needs of priority wildlife species and habitats.

Florida—Florida entered into their first agreement with NRCS in 2003, for two private lands biologists that worked exclusively on Farm Bill Conservation Program delivery, and primarily WHIP. In 2004, they entered into a separate Cooperative Agreement that funded an additional three biologists. In 2008, a new contribution agreement now funds six biologists. Half of these positions are currently co-located in NRCS offices, and we are working on co-locating the balance in NRCS offices. About half the work performed is conservation planning and half is conservation program delivery for primarily WHIP, EQIP, WRP and to a lesser extent CSP.

State fish and wildlife agencies are collaborating with NGOs and USDA to put partner biologists on the ground to help deliver conservation programs and biological technical assistance because of the declining state budgetary climate. These states include Virginia, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ohio, Colorado, Kansas, South Dakota, Nebraska, and New Hampshire to name a few. Specific examples of the partner biologists contributions to conservation program delivery follows.

Kansas—Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP) private lands technical assistance began in 1973 when wildlife biologist were hired to work directly with private landowners to improve habitat. The Kansas Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP), the first private land habitat program in Kansas, began in 1974 and continues today. Since the implementation of the Food, Conservation and Energy Act (Farm Bill) of 1985, KDWP private land biologists have taken on an ever increasing role in delivering conservation programs. As new programs and initiatives are developed, KDWP has entered into agreements and partnerships with several partners to broaden the impact of the Departments commitment to improve habitat on private lands, which make up 97% of the state.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)—KDWP has been involved delivering CRP, the largest habitat improvement program, since its beginning in 1985. The Conservation Assistance Program was developed in 1988 by KDWP to encourage farmers to enroll CRP practices most beneficial to wildlife. Through this program, liaison efforts of Kansas WHIP and KDWP's working relationship with NRCS, Kansas has enrolled more acres in native grasses than any state in the nation. To increase enrollment in Continuous CRP buffer practices KDWP developed a partnership in 2001 to hire temporary employee's to work in local USDA offices and promote buffer enrollment. Through this program and the efforts of KDWP biologists' working directly with NRCS, Continuous CRP enrollment has increased to over 108,000 acres; nearly half of those acres are wildlife practices CP33 and CP38E.

Cooperative Agreement with NRCS—KDWP entered into a MOA with the NRCS in 1994 to provide six Wildlife Biologist to work 3 days per week in NRCS Area Offices. The impetus for this agreement was a need to assist NRCS in complying with the wetland provisions of the Food Security Act and assist with delivery of conservation programs to NRCS staff. Since 1994 the Area Biologists have assisted NRCS with thousands of wetland determinations. In the past 5 years NRCS personnel devoted to making wetland determination has decreased from ten to five, strengthening the importance of the Area Biologist role with NRCS. Area Biologists have assisted with Wetlands Reserve Program delivery beginning in 1995. Kansas has 171 WRP agreements on 17,410 enrolled acres.

Since 2003 the Area Biologist program has been under a Cooperative Agreement with NRCS. The Cooperative Agreement has provided the salaries of six Wildlife Biologist Technicians which work in Area Biologist's districts providing technical assistance and helping to deliver USDA Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). Cooperation between KDWP and NRCS remains strong and this continues to be an excellent program for both agencies, furthering the ability to deliver USDA programs in a manner consistent with improving wildlife habitat throughout the state.

Contributory Agreement—NRCS—In July of 2003, KDWP entered into a contributory agreement with the NRCS to assist with administration and delivery of the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). The delivery of WHIP within Kansas is being accomplished by 16 District Biologists and 10 Biologist Technicians (five bio-techs funded through the cooperative agreement and five funded through the contributory agreement). The success of this contributory agreement has allowed for the hire of an additional five unclassified Biologist Technicians to aid in the delivery of WHIP and provide technical assistance to landowners. Since the beginning of this agreement over 1,000 Federal WHIP contracts have been completed, improving wildlife habitat on nearly 130,000 acres, and providing over \$4.7 million dollars in Federal funds to landowners (*Table 1*).

**Table 1—KDWP Federal WHIP Delivery
Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program—NRCS—KDWP Delivery**

Year	No. of Contracts	Acres	Dollars Approved
2003	101	14,483	\$456,994
2004	148	17,914	\$593,861
2005	171	18,269	\$596,122
2006	182	27,733	\$790,547
2007	133	16,540	\$500,581
2008	151	13,721	\$820,796
2009	116	20,005	\$979,200

Table 1—KDWP Federal WHIP Delivery—Continued
Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program—NRCS—KDWP Delivery

Year	No. of Contracts	Acres	Dollars Approved
Totals:	1,002	128,665	\$4,738,101

KDWP has been working directly with private landowners to develop habitat since 1973. By promoting sound wildlife management practices and providing technical and financial assistance to landowners for over 11 years before the first farm bill was enacted, relationships were built and the groundwork laid that made possible the delivery of the myriad of farm bill programs that we have today. KDWP will continue to be the leader in providing assistance to landowners who have a desire to develop habitat and will work with our partners to help develop and deliver programs beneficial to wildlife in Kansas. As more emphasis is placed on wildlife in all farm bill programs and special initiatives are developed to address our greatest conservation needs, it will be critical that funding is made available to strengthen existing agreements and partnerships that deliver conservation programs and provide for biological technical assistance.

Colorado—Colorado has had four partner biologists NRCS since 2003. These partner biologists provide wildlife-related technical assistance and expertise in the development and implementation of Farm Bill Programs. Biologists stationed in NRCS office throughout the state develop NRCS habitat conservation management plans, provide technical guidance and training on wildlife habitat concerns to NRCS staff and landowners, and establish partnerships between government agencies and local stakeholders. The technical and program support focuses primarily on the wildlife habitat conservation aspects of the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). The Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW), NRCS, and the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory (RMBO) are working with NRCS to facilitate farm bill program delivery as part of Colorado's Private Lands Biologist (PLB) Program. The RMBO also employs a program coordinator to support the partner biologists.

Nebraska—Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC) maintains a very active private lands division and shares partner biologists with Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited and NRCS to deliver conservation programs and biological technical assistance. NGPC has funded and shared partner biologists in local USDA offices (both FSA and NRCS) since the 1990's. After the buffer coordinators of the 1990's, the agencies added CRP technical assistance to the list of duties and two partner biologists housed in NRCS offices beginning in 2002. NGPC private lands staff continue working with USDA local offices to provide more biological technical assistance for USDA programs, staff and clients. Specifically, NGPC private lands staff played a huge role in promoting and enrolling landowners in CP38 within a two county area of the state that resulted in enrollment of close to 50% of the state's SAFE acres. Together, NGPC private land staff and partner biologists completed the conservation plans, seeding sheets, and the paperwork necessary to put habitat on the ground and dollars in landowner's pockets.

Ohio—The Ohio Division of Wildlife (ODOW), Pheasants Forever, and the Ohio NRCS have utilized three different contribution agreements since August 2008. These agreements facilitate partner biologists to work on CRP Mid-Contract Management Assistance as well as WRP monitoring and marketing assistance. For CRP Mid-contract management, ODOW assists NRCS with the assessment of vegetative cover on fields and wetlands enrolled in the CRP through required mid-contract management (MCM). These assessments include walking these fields and completing a form which records the vegetative diversity, grassland/forb composition, amount of bare ground, contract violations, and grass density of the stand. Initial field assessments commence during years 4–7 of a 10 year CRP contract. The forms are then utilized during meetings with the landowners to review and recommend appropriate practices (*e.g.*, light disking, prescribed burning, interseeding forbs, *etc.*) that will improve the wildlife cover. From 8/13/08 through 6/30/2010, partner biologists completed 875 CRP fields assessed covering 8,993 acres and attended about 75 landowner meetings to review the field assessments and provide cover management recommendations. For WRP monitoring, three interns annually complete a comprehensive restored wetland monitoring report for lands enrolled in the WRP across Ohio. Monitoring includes recording such data as current vegetation quality/conditions within the wetland and associated buffer, wildlife use, restoration activities, wetland class, hydrology, and management issues as well as involves a landowner interview, recording of GPS coordinates of the wetland area and easement

boundary, and noting any violations of the easement. Ohio currently has approximately 350 WRP sites and the goal of this project is to complete monitoring on 90–100 wetlands annually until all have been completed. From 6/15/2009 through 10/15/2010, these interns will monitor 97 WRP sites covering 5330 acres. Furthermore, beginning in the fall of 2009, Ohio NRCS was given the goal of enrolling 11,000 acres of WRP by the end of October 2010. Ohio entered into a contribution agreement in which the DOW provided a part-time biologist to NRCS to assist with marketing WRP to the public. The DOW private lands biologists have developed a network of contacts through with conservation organizations and hunting clubs that would be able to market WRP to landowners and farmers across the state. This biologist worked closely with NRCS county staff, other DOW employees, and wetland teams to utilize the media and publish information documents that were sent to landowners. To date, NRCS has collected 8,000 acres worth of applications in a 6 month period associated with this partner biologist position.

Finally, the Intermountain West Joint Venture (IWJV) has developed a Capacity Grants Program and brokered new partner biologist positions in Wyoming, Nevada, California, and Oregon to facilitate focused habitat work through farm bill conservation programs for sage-grouse, migratory waterfowl, and shorebirds. The IWJV continues to seek new partnerships and opportunities to deliver conservation programs and biological technical assistance.

Conclusion

The state fish and wildlife agencies are thoroughly committed to and vested in assisting USDA by providing biological technical assistance to both the Department and the private agriculture, grazing and forest landowners to fulfill effective delivery of farm bill conservation programs that are vital to the sustainability of the Nation's fish and wildlife resources and the habitats on which they (and our citizens) depend. Successful partnerships between the state fish and wildlife agencies, USDA, and NGO partner organizations need to be encouraged, enhanced and supported with adequate Federal funding to match partner state and NGO funds. This collaboration is particularly critical as demand from landowners for these popular conservation programs increase, but USDA capacity to deliver these programs fails to keep pace or even worse, declines. The Association and the state fish and wildlife agencies remain committed to working with the Committee to ensure the on the ground conservation success of these vital programs. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this Statement for the Record.

